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THE WESTERNER

Luke Allan

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THE WESTERNER

WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT




Claude Maughan, an Englishman, finding his late uncle has been swindled in a Canadian land deal, sets out to punish the land agent, Daniel Corfield.

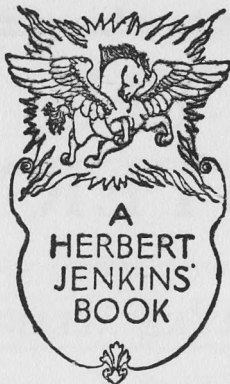
As soon as he arrives at Medicine Hat, he gets involved in the intricacies of Canadian life, and his adventures begin.

There is his desperate fight with a prairie fire; his encounter with Inspector Barker, of the North-West Mounted Police; his meeting with Julia Kingsley, and how he saves her life in a dust storm; the disappearance of Julia's fiancé, Archie Wampole, and his determination to pocket the five thousand dollars reward Archie's father is offering for the return of his son.

THE WESTERNER

BY
LUKE ALLAN

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THE WESTERNER

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CHAPTER I

THE ENGLISHMAN

IN the brittle clearness of a July afternoon the cowtown of Medicine Hat lay stretching itself awake after a stifling day. Hot it was still, with the dry, face-stiffening harshness that weakens the spirit of the tenderfoot and turns his squinting eyes to the molten sky in search of promise of rain. Yet there was no languor in the air; the Western briskness rather tempted defiance of the blistering sun. Up over the fringe of the cup-shaped hollow where the town lay, a prairie breeze was ever blowing, and though it did not penetrate the valley, it deigned to scatter the aroma of its freshness along the blazing streets and over the panting buildings.

But Medicine Hat, an old-timers' town, fell to no deceptive promise of playful prairie wind. It knew the withering heat that blanched the prairie, and it wisely remained indoors till the sun's keenest power was past, lounging in shirt sleeves and belt, dawdling somnolently through the afternoon hours.

Now, at a quarter to six, it was beginning to bestir itself within the shelter of darkened stores. The sun was still a glowing ball that blistered what it touched, but closing hour was ahead—and the baseball game after dinner. The streets were still deserted, save for the unlucky panting few who had to be abroad. Against the screen store doors swarms of flies lazily buzzed, millions of them, swept into town before the breeze of the ranges.

From end to end Toronto Street was quiet as the prairie itself.

But there was a world that had no time to doze. Over the roofs came the bleak shrill of a freight train staggering painfully into the first drop of the grade beyond the South Saskatchewan River. From the railway yard a noisy little shunting engine replied in a panic and scuttled to clear the main line for the irresistible impetus of a dangerous grade. Later, chugging out from its haven on a siding, it would attach itself to the rear of the freight and push it up the eastern slope toward Dunmore Junction and the long level prairie run eastward. Medicine Hat, sunken in a valley bottom, from a railway point of view was an impossible location for a town.

Distance lay harsh over the Western world, painfully untempered to eye and ear, stark and rigid in the limpid atmosphere. Only experience softened the blow of sight and sound where dust and cloud and shadow did not exist.

A plaintive whistle from far across the railway tracks announced six o'clock. Quickly it was joined by another, harsher and rounder and more imposing. These the audible records of the woollen and flour mills, Medicine Hat's two lone industries. Out against the buffalo-tracked face of the cutbanks about the town the sound beat, and returned unmellowed.

Before the echoes were gone Toronto Street was alive—hasty, energetic life, as befitted an ambitious town, in an ambitious part of an ambitious country—as befitted the nervous tang of the crisp air. A dozen screen doors whined on dry hinges, slammed and swung, and into the street, as if they had been boiling with industry all the sleepy afternoon, gushed the clerks. Behind them their bosses, turning keys with hasty hand and hurrying away. As if worked by some gigantic mechanism, Medicine Hat was closed for the night.

Only the post office, opposite the Provincial Hotel, and the barber shop further up the street, dallied. In the

warped doorway of the post office, a shabby plaster building built with the town's first growing pains, revealing in its wretchedness the unorthodox political sentiments of the place, a tall, gaunt, iron-grey man, with peevish lines in his forehead accentuated now into active irritation, settled himself impatiently against the jamb and gazed hostilely up and down the street at the escaping prisoners, one long lean hand pawing his moustache. It was his clerk's night off—and it was baseball night!

In the barber shop an impatient customer, looming huge beneath the soiled white apron, was enduring the last stages of a hair-cut. Caligni himself, the Italian proprietor, had just taken the shears from an assistant whose working hours for the day were over.

The big man in the chair whipped the apron aside and drew from his vest pocket a huge gold hunting case watch with a presentation inscription covering the front.

"Here, you, Cal," he growled, "get a wiggle on. I got to get to that ball game."

"Anything on it!" asked the Italian, patiently pushing the apron back into the customer's neckband.

The man in the chair glanced carefully about the empty shop.

"Fifty bucks on the series—evens," he whispered.

"You're in luck. I couldn't get more'n ten, and at five to four. Them Edmonton guys are scared stiff."

"With Works in the box for two of the three games they've need to be." He stopped to chuckle. "We started a yarn that Works was sick—couldn't pitch. That's how I got my fifty. Mason managed to get in a hundred and seventy-five before they got suspicious. The other fellow offered me thirty to get out of it when he found out how we'd fooled 'em."

Caligni sighed jealously and fell to the shears.

Round the corner of Toronto and South Railway Street ambled a rangy sorrel horse. Two men seated on the elevated Provincial veranda watched it and its rider with a curious amusement, winking at each other, and as the

horse drew up beneath the veranda one of them detached himself from his tilted chair and clumped down the fourteen steps to the horse's head. There he stood, expectorating liberally, waiting for the rider to dismount.

But the latter took his time. Without acknowledging the existence of the ostler he sat for several seconds peering about with eager eyes on the hurrying clerks, a slightly supercilious tilt to his sensitive lips.

He was a thin, long-boned man, with a solemnity of countenance that seemed to have acquired the permanence of a physical scar, a mark that set him so apart from the easy smiling Westerner that, without other distinguishing signs, it proclaimed him a tenderfoot. It fairly shouted to the natives to come and have a look. And they came—and saw an Englishman. Aggressively an Englishman. Long and narrow of face, his close-cut hair sprinkled over the ears with grey, there was, nevertheless, an air of self-confident youthfulness about him. He looked like one who had tried himself in many straits and found no reason to worry.

The shapely whiteness of his hands and the carefulness of his garb were the other distinguishing marks of local inexperience—light drab riding breeches faced with leather, high stock collar held by a long gold pin, navy blue coat now greyed with prairie dust, horn handled riding crop and shaped cavalry boots. The streets of Medicine Hat had looked on him daily for almost two weeks—and still looked, and smiled with utmost frankness and personal indifference.

The hurrying street glanced up at him now and smiled, and suddenly a reflective, wondering frown marked his forehead. The ostler, unaccustomed to await anyone's convenience, jerked the horse's head impatiently, and the Englishman looked down on him with a start.

"Didn't notice you, Joe," he apologized.

"How'd she go to-day, Mr. Maughan?" asked the ostler, pausing to relieve his bulging cheek of a mass of exhausted tobacco.

A marvellous change came to the thin face above him. A smile beamed down on the browned and dirty ostler, so attractive and unexpected that he grinned back with the intimacy of an old friend.

"That pommel is going to be the death of me yet, Joe," said Maughan, lifting his leg over the saddle.

"'Horn's' good enough for these parts," offered the ostler in a kindly way. "Another week or two and you'll be a sure-'nuff Westerner."

The calm eyes of the other bored into his lazy ones.

"I guess that's what I'm aiming for, Joe." Again that sunny smile, as he gingerly stretched arms and legs. "But I can't say I feel any twinges of it yet. Now a stirrup like that"—he held up the deep wooden affair with its stiff foot-block and examined it critically—"I can't see the use of it . . . except to add to the price and—and quaintness."

The ostler chuckled—the old-timer to the tenderfoot.

"Some day you'll get piled, then you'll sure see."

"Piled? You mean—oh, thrown."

A drawling voice came down to them over the veranda railing.

"Hi, yoh, Lord Cholmondeley! Yoh ce'tainly got to put skids unduh yohself if yoh goin' to have a 'bawth' befoh dinnuh."

The Englishman shifted slowly and lifted his face to the speaker. The round smiling countenance of a cowboy loomed on him over the railing from beneath an exaggerated sombrero balanced on the back of a mass of oily black hair. And inasmuch as the cowboy had not troubled to drop his feet from the railing, the soles of the high-heeled riding boots stuck up on either side of his head like ridiculously contorted ears. Before the Englishman's solemn inspection the smile did not falter, and a practised stream of tobacco juice shot over at a safe distance to demonstrate a chronic indifference to Maughan's feelings.

Maughan, apparently satisfied, turned to the ostler as if the cowboy did not exist.

"Have him round to-morrow at nine. And tie up a feed of oats. I may be out all day."

Something gurgled in the cowboy's throat. "Don't yoh go foh to bothuh about them skittish things, King Eddy. This same dead yeller grass is about all yoh can handle in that buskskin's hide . . . unless yoh lookin' foh trouble."

"You heard me?" said Maughan to the ostler.

Riding crop dangling from his hand, he strolled up the fourteen steps to the veranda level and turned to look out over the low stores across the street. To the west, over the edge of the shadow-darkened cutbank toward Calgary, the sun was a plate of burnished gold on an enamelled wall. It was still four hours from sinking, and its glare was hard and unrelenting; but the eye could endure it now. The tail of the long freight was feeling its way down the grade behind the stores, the continuous whistle of the engine coming now from close to the high-arched bridge spanning the river. Maughan could just see the upper line of the arches; and presently there broke over all the sounds of the revived town the creaking of the thousand-foot span of metal beneath the heavy train. He focused his eyes further and dreamily picked out on the face of the cutbank the winding trails worn by the countless buffalo that had once used the valley as winter-quarters. And something of the romance of the ancient story—ancient, yet within his own lifetime—made his face light up.

The door of the barber shop emptied its two lone occupants. Pausing for a last word at the edge of the sidewalk, Caligni's darting eyes noted the Englishman. Without a word his brows lifted inquiringly; he turned to his companion, still inquiring silently. As if he had spoken, the other replied:

"Search me. I've been wondering, too, like blazes."

A faint smile passed across their lips as their eyes met and held with a significant steadiness.

"Never saw an Englishman who wouldn't gamble," said Caligni reflectively.

His companion's jaw hardened.

"Splits?" suggested Caligni, pleadingly.

The other laughed harshly. "I saw him first . . . And when Corfield the Cordial gets on his trail——" His heavy shoulders went up in a lazy shrug.

So intent were they on their own schemes that they did not notice Maughan's eyes drop to them for a moment and lift again. Not a muscle of his face moved.

All above his head the arc of the heavens was a clear blue that shallowed as it neared the sun. But away to the south a thin, low, dirty-white cloud unexpectedly interrupted the smooth colour of the sky. Maughan's brow contracted slightly as he saw it.

The cowboy laughed aloud. "Only a bit of a prairie fire, Sir Alg'non. Common as coyotes. Wipe out a crazy fa'muh or two, perhaps, if they's any luck. 'Tain't goin' to hu't yoh. This heuh baseball game's comin' off just the same—and that's all that mattuhs."

He jerked his feet from the railing and jumped up, holding wide the hairy legs of his chaps to flap them ridiculously.

"Shoo! Shoo! Yoh'll miss yoh bawth, Lo'd love us, and that'll be wuss than the Judgment Day to yoh."

He shambled over to the solemnly unperturbed Englishman, the chaps flapping loosely about his bowed legs and the leather rubbing with a harsh, scratching sound, and placed his hand in a friendly way on Maughan's shoulder.

"Look heuh, Cockney, yoh ain't havin' no gay time heuh, I bet. I know this old-timuhs' town. Now yoh and me's goin' to let loose to-night. I'm layin' myself out to break yoh into the rip-roarin'est game Gawd evuh invented since them charades in the Garden. I'm goin' to make a Westuhn of yoh if it breaks a leg. And we're stawtin' to-night, see? Yoh not goin' back home and say——"

Maughan's solemn face opened.

"I'm not going home—ever."

"Cripes! Neighboh, I shore like yoh. Put it there. If yoh not goin' home, then yoh stoppin' right heuh, right heuh in Medicine Hat. This is the only spot on Gawd's earth—and I've tried 'em all from Texas to Sunny Alberta."

He grabbed Maughan's thin white hand and worked it up and down, while his left hand swept off the wide-brimmed Stetson.

"Yes," said Maughan, "I'm staying right here in Medicine Hat . . . that is, if they want me."

"Shore we want yoh. They's half a hund'ed real estate shawks in this heuh town's ready to cross their hearts about it. Me—I'm sayin' nothin', 'cause yoh haven't enough money to make me care a cuss if I don't like yoh. But I'm takin' yoh in hand foh the game. It stawts at seven-fifteen. Dinnuh's on early special. Scat!"

Maughan consulted the rotunda clock. "But I won't have time. I must have a bath and change. I was thinking of going to the theatre. It looks as if it might be Western." He smiled.

"Oh, the show? But it don't stawt till nine-thirty. They wouldn't have even the caretakuh with a game on. Yoh come with me and I'll go to the show with yoh aftuh."

Maughan considered. "If you'll do me the honour of dining with me——"

But the cowboy was already in retreat, waving his hand.

"Don't owe me nothin', old hoss. I sit at the ranchuhs' table. See yoh latuh. Thanks mightily, just the same."

It was fully half an hour before Maughan reappeared in the hotel rotunda. He had taken a bath and changed to a neat dark brown suit, spotless and well pressed. Shirt and collar were fresh, his shoes gleamed like a mirror, and a small pink pearl adorned his tie. The group in the rotunda watched him sinking from step to step, curiously, half-smiling. Over in the corner the cowboy sat picking his teeth impatiently, his oily black hair set like polished

steel by the back of the common hair brush in the washroom. With squinting, not quite approving, eyes he watched the immaculate stranger.

Maughan strolled over to him. The cowboy's eyes were riveted on the gleaming low shoes.

"When I saw them feet comin' down the stairs I thought shore it must be a nigguh. Only niggus shine their boots like that in this country—except ridin' boots." He thrust out his own glossy footwear with the narrow shape and high heels. "But yoh'll learn. I thought yoh were goin' to the baseball game."

"I said I would if you dined with me. Now I'm going to the theatre instead." But at the look of growing disappointment in the cowboy's face he relented. "I'll be your companion to-morrow night, if I may."

"Yoh shore get yoh own way, don't yoh, John Bull? Well, I'm foh the game. Maybe see yoh latuh at the show."

He hurried through the door and down the front steps, and Maughan passed on to the dining-room where, at the visitors' table, he shared the attentions of a pompadoured waitress with a company of human freaks, Franklin's Lilliputians, the travelling company that was putting on the performance at the "Opera House."

Maughan was frankly interested in them. At lunch one of the tiny men had leaned across the table to a huge chaperon and whispered hoarsely: "For God's sake, Harry, get me a plug of Bull-Durham. I'm dying for a chew." And one of the little ladies, raised on a pile of cushions to get within reach of her plate, had frankly rejected the first mouthful of soup and inquired feelingly of Maughan, "Ain't that just hell?" And when Maughan smiled she leaned over the corner and tapped him on the arm with a gurgling, "Oh, you man!" Maughan fancied they might be interesting.

CHAPTER II

THE PRAIRIE FIRE

AS he dropped down the long steps of the Provincial and turned toward the "Opera House," a dirty, kitchen-chaired hall over a hardware store, the sky to the south, still almost light as mid-day, was thick with a murky smoke. The slight cloud he had noticed more than three hours before had grown to dimensions that interested even the few who had remained from the baseball game. Detached pairs and groups and individuals, coming up and down Toronto Street to the show, pointed and looked and passed on. A warm wind blew gustily on Maughan's face as he started in beside the store toward the long climb of outdoor stairs that led to the hall entrance.

There had been many small puffs of smoke on the horizon since Maughan arrived, and they had always held for him a fascination that appeared unwarranted in the light of the easy familiarity with which the old-timers greeted them. Prairie fires were ever a threat, but they aroused no personal excitement until they reached tremendous proportions or menaced one's own property.

The Mounted Police were fighting them daily, to the north, where no man lived, almost equally with the south, where ranchers and farmers divided the land. Since mid-June there had not been a drop of rain, as is usual in the semi-arid belt, and day after day the dead grass of seasons fluttered brittily before the scorching winds with the breathless rustle of the restless prairie. So long as the short, juicy fresh-season growth, hidden beneath the long tasteless stalks of the older grass, offered itself, neither cattle nor horses would eat this ideal fodder for every match or spark or lightning stroke that fell.

A solid foot of the driest fodder known, ready almost to break into flame before the blazing eighteen-hours-a-

day sunshine. In the winter a little of it would be eaten off by the roving herds as they broke through the loose snow to their feed, but from season to season miles of it lay waiting for a careless cigarette stub, and a wind, to make it one of the most terrifying forces of nature.

Only a tireless Police had kept down the blazes that started along the horizon since the June rains ceased and the sun became a withering furnace. The customary fireguards were run with the regularity of the season, or enforced by the Police; but a fireguard of the ordinary width was of use only in the early stages of a prairie fire. In the north the Police fought alone, without much idea of how the flames started. To the south ranchers and farmers, never working together, had thus far kept down the fires that threatened their own farms and ranges. Maughan whiffed lightly at the slightly tainted air and wondered what would happen when a fire got beyond control. He was soon to know.

From the ball game the crowd came directly to the Lilliputians, and the hall was packed. Medicine Hat could not afford to miss any entertainment that offered, and Franklin's Lilliputians had always drawn well on their annual tour. Maughan discovered that he laughed more easily than he used to—rather enjoyed himself. But principally he enjoyed the mirth of others. Half across the house he could see his cowboy friend held from completely helpless hilarity only by the crowding of his neighbours, and once the swimming eyes caught his and the cowboy yelled to him above the applause, "Oh, boy, eh?" But the performance wearied before the end, and when the curtain fell Maughan stretched legs and arms, stifled a yawn, and fell in with the departing throng.

As he reached the top of the precipitous wooden stairs that led to the street he was met by an uncanny glare that painted the stores opposite and the excited life of the filling street in colours like the ravings of a fevered brain. Over everything a prodigal colourist had washed a flickering

ochre hue that sent shivers through Maughan as he stared, and wrought the crowd to a strangely subdued, awed fascination. Fire, of course, he knew it was, but a fire like a world conflagration, a terrific force of nature before which man could only stand and take his chance. The sky was golden, as if a yellow screen had been drawn before the daylight. The faces of the crowd on the street below, every one turned to the south, were bathed in an unnatural reflection, and from their lips rose a low murmur of awe, the instinctive reverence of man for the bigger things of a tremendous world.

Maughan hesitated. Once more the crowd interested him. Down in the sea of upturned faces were two or three spots of red, each the heart of movement, each directing a flow of human life that wanted only to stand and gape. Maughan recognized the town uniform of the Mounted Police. He stumbled down on the heels of the hastening line.

At the foot of the steps a prim blue uniform had taken its stand—Inspector Barker, the local head of the Mounted Police. He had no time to waste on the spectacle of the flames; he stood at the edge of the descending line, eyes ranging over it as it passed, face grim, sharp low words jerking at intervals from tight lips. In his right hand he held a cane, and now and then it shot into the crowd and tapped a man on the shoulder. Beyond him the line split, one section dropping out toward the hand that held the cane and passing on to the sidewalk without a word. Maughan crowded nearer. The cane, retiring swiftly from a young man ahead, touching his shoulder lightly.

“Get in line for the rigs.”

Maughan noticed then that a number of democrats were drawn up beside the sidewalk, and men were climbing into them, some laughing unnaturally, some serious. The intervening store fell behind him, and Maughan, gazing away up Toronto Street toward the prairie, saw a sight that made him thrill. The weird ochre visible from the theatre steps was there a lurid sky of fire, a solid mass of

molton gold that thinned as it rose. Unconsciously he dropped from the line. The Inspector's stick struck him smartly on the forearm.

"Move along, move along. Get in line."

"But—but——" stammered Maughan.

"Shut up. Do as you're told. You're going out to fight that prairie fire."

Every instinct in the Englishman moved him to resent the order. His body bristled with stubbornness.

"But I'm a stranger—a visitor. I——"

"Do you hear me? You're requisitioned by the Police. It doesn't matter if you're the King himself."

Maughan had an idea that his nationality was being held in ridicule, and with a foolish impulse he darted out of the line. The Inspector's cane flashed out and the crook caught him in the arm and almost jerked him from his feet.

"One word more and you'll go to the cells instead."

Maughan saw the square jaw and flashing eyes, and the crowd held motionless, wondering and unsympathetic by the mere wave of the official arm. He capitulated. With good grace he ranged up beside the Inspector. The crowd moved again. A bulky, laughing-faced man with a sweeping moustache was working his way through.

"I guess we won't need you, Bill," said the Inspector. "You'll take up more room than you're worth."

"Hell!" exploded the big fellow. "Bill Duke's going to be in this, if he *is* Mayor of Medicine Hat. I'm going to that fire if I have to walk. Here, you fellows ahead, keep a good seat in the middle of a rig for Bill Duke."

Maughan made a request. "I say, may I ride my own horse?"

The Inspector searched his eyes swiftly.

"Sure! If it's not already taken for those rigs. But, remember, my young buck, you can't fool with this game."

"You have the word of an Englishman," said Maughan stiffly.

"Never found it much better than anyone else's. *Your* word's enough."

Maughan ran to the hotel, telephoned the livery stable where he hired his horse by the week, changed to riding clothes, and by the time the horse came clattering up the street was waiting for it at the top of the hotel steps. He was at the head of the procession, impatient to start on a new adventure, when Sergeant Prior, casting appraising eye over the arm of fire fighters in the rigs behind, rode up beside him.

"Elk Lake trail as far as you can go," the Sergeant shouted to another Policeman, "then hug the fire, dropping them one by one." He noticed Maughan. "Here, get some sacking from the rigs. You can't fight a prairie fire with a stare."

Maughan spurred back, grabbed a handful of sacking from the first rig, and set off at a gallop after the Sergeant. At the top of Toronto Street he drew level.

From the crest of the grade, where the street rose from the valley to the prairie and became absorbed in a two-rutted trail that ran southwards to the Cypress Hills, he came in full view of the fire. His rein hand clutched spasmodically as he realized the scope of the thing a few puny men hoped to smother. It was more than a flaring sky from here. All across the south a wall of livid flame rose in long, curling fingers that overlapped and licked and swallowed each other. A million maniac gods wringing their hands and clawing at each other and the puny world.

Close to the ground it was a solid yellow, but gradually as it lifted it divided into innumerable fronds of unsatisfied, searching clutch. Dark lines, hateful as the glow, streaked through it and ended in points that seemed to reach for the sky through the great banks of smoke that rolled and throttled upwards to the zenith. That pall of surging smoke was in itself a nightmare. Lurid as the flames themselves at first, it mounted in great rounded masses that travelled at incredible speed, shot at the lower edges with living sparks like stars let loose. The whole sky had retired,

appalled or subdued. Maughan felt as if the world on which he rode was going to join it.

He turned his face firmly away and looked back over his shoulder into the town-filled valley. Yellow it was to the last line, with scarcely a shadow from that all-pervading glow. The rumble of the wheels of the democrats came up to him—the lashing of ruthless whips—the cries of excited drivers urging up the long slope to the prairie. Maughan's lips parted in a hopeless laugh.

The Sergeant leaned out and gave his rein hand a jerk.

"Steady down, you English loon. You've got a long ride ahead and a dirty lot of hard work. Better wait for the others."

"But I want to go with you."

The Sergeant shifted his gaze with a slow smile to the awful furnace ahead.

"You'll think differently an hour from now—unless you're full brother to Shadrach and Abednego."

Maughan shut his teeth and kept on, and the Sergeant stared at him a moment with dawning respect.

They were racing straight into Judgment Day. The heat already threw across the miles and lapped their set faces. A sullen roar came to them, unbroken, growing subtly with every leap forward. And yet they had been riding but half an hour and the fire was another half-hour ahead. Every yard the terrifying details struck Maughan more forcibly—the white heat-glow below, changing gradually to orange and ochre, licking forward in darting, curved ends like the tops of waves. The slant, the upward shoot of the flames, gave them an added appearance of express speed on the heels of the wind that stirred about them. Maughan peered speculatively into the death before them, then sideways at his companion's tight lips.

"Going into that?" he asked, an eager light in his eyes.

"Going straight along as we're riding now . . . but not into that. It'll be past the trail, I'm hoping, by the time we reach it. We're passing through. I must get to the other side to see its depth and organize the fighting

over there. The ranchers and farmers won't work together until they're made to . . . and everybody's got to work where he's put to-night. Got a message through three hours ago to the Double LF, but the poles are gone now. We'll make for the Double LF."

The nearing flames were fascinating Maughan. His scalp stirred excitedly, even while his eyes ached with staring and his skin began to dry and draw across his cheeks. He felt himself thrilling to the bounding horse beneath him, to the unreality of the whole affair. He had an inclination to take off his cap and shout—and he had never done such a thing in all his life.

"I say," he threw at the Sergeant across the high trail-ridge that separated them, "have the Mounted Police the power to do this sort of thing—take men from the street and send them out to risk their lives?"

The Sergeant laughed shortly.

"My dear tenderfoot, the Mounted Police do any darn thing they like—whether they have the power or not. By the time you've convinced yourself they've gone too far it's too late. You can't cover the contingencies of a country like this by detailed legislation. *We* cover them on the spur of the moment . . . and are sorry afterwards if we've made a mistake—*only* sorry."

The roaring wind and flames drowned their voices now—a gale that seemed to pluck at their horses and swing them eastward in the path of the flames, to press them sideways until their muscles ached fighting it. The manes of the horses stood out straight to the left, and the buttons of their coats dragged. The skin of their faces that had a few minutes before drawn uncomfortably, set as if it were the thickened surface of a scar. Maughan knew that he could not smile if he wanted to. Away to the east the fire was raging like an express train—and he was but an insect on that train. Human control! He jeered at it, and Prior heard the strange note and studied him for a moment. Then the Sergeant settled to his work, seeing only the path ahead. As they neared the track of the flames Maughan

noticed that they were dimmer where the two black ruts disappeared into it; no longer was it living flame, but dense and livid smoke. And yet it was suicide—he knew it, but did not think of drawing back.

With the heat almost unbearable, the thick pall of glowing smoke close before them, Prior pulled up.

“Wrap the sacking about your horse’s head.” He was methodically showing how on his own mount. “Now, twist the rest about yourself. Leave a peep-hole; you can’t trust to your horse in this. Don’t lose sight of me. If you should, try and keep to the trail. I may have to leave it if the fire is dragging ahead. There’s really not much danger except from suffocation . . . or if your horse throws you. Hold your seat at all costs. Now, come on.”

They plunged into the choking glare.

The track they were to follow was two deep ruts worn by the wheels of ten thousand buckboards and the feet of a million horses, but in there it was visible only in spots as the smoke curled away, leaving a deeper black along the sides where once long grass had grown. The horses snorted and plunged at first, but seemed quickly to realize that safety lay in obeying the guiding hands of their riders. With an uncanny sense they clung to the ruts they could not see, even when the two suffocating men blindly let them have their heads. From the blackened carpet that lay about them shot spurts of delayed flame, twining wreaths of stifling, pungent smoke. Fitful flickers flared into their dim eyes where dry cactus stalks held the flame. At times their eyes swam into a great sea of light that defied effort to focus on the perils of the way.

Through the small openings they had left in the protecting sacking about their heads the searing heat flooded with waves of intense suffering. Maughan’s eyes felt as if the lids would never fall over them again, and, once closed, it was agony to open them; yet he must keep the Sergeant in sight. The choking smoke was even worse, and the acrid sting of the hot soot and dust kicked up by the horses increased the terror of their advance. Their eyes ran to

blind pools of tears, their throats contracted, their nostrils closed until their lungs felt as if they would burst. Maughan's whole body was in the grip of clutching, tearing fingers that dug deeper than any suffering he had ever known. His head whirled dizzily; he caught himself tottering in the saddle.

Perhaps it was fortunate that the terror of his mount and his own fear of being thrown kept his mind a little from his own pain. In time he became more accustomed to the horror of it, and with its deepest pangs went some of the agony of starved lungs, of cracking skin and filled nostrils. They seemed to be riding in a great circle of searchlights that beat on a thick fog, so that the fog itself became the illuminant. Maughan recalled some of the daytime fogs of London. The ground beneath their feet was a horrible inferno, and the wind sucked at them madly.

Twice the Sergeant was forced from the trail to the west—lapping, leaping flames barred the way—but Maughan stuck to him without question. Away from the trail they roamed a compassless void.

As they advanced they found the fire curiously retarded. It raged almost beside the trail. Maughan kept his eyes pinned to the smoking tunic of the policeman as a guide to his own danger. Second by second he waited for it to burst into flame. He could feel the heat now as if he were unclothed—his very underwear burned so that he shrank from it. His horse, once a striking sorrel, was black as the track of the flames. Reeling in his saddle, he wondered if he could stick it. Prior was riding faster now, clinging to the dim trail.

Then suddenly they emerged into clear air. It was as if a blazing gas jet surging over them had been turned off. Air—cool, quiet prairie that paid homage to the great fire only in reflection. The path of the flames was as clear cut as the swath of a mowing machine—mere insignificant dabs of flickering flames along the edge. Prior tore the sacking away and leaned heavily on the horn of his saddle, his haggard face turned admiringly on Maughan.

CHAPTER III

AT THE DOUBLE LF

IN an instant the Sergeant was firm and upright again, peering eagerly about and ahead.

"Wind's changing a bit north," he shouted. Then, in sheer relief, he laughed. "Say, you're a sight. Oh, those beautiful riding breeches! Those natty cavalry boots! You begin to look as if you belonged."

Maughan wiped the pain and fear and soot from his eyes and contemplated his blackened knees. "And they came from Saville Row. I'm not likely to have another pair."

"I suppose they have your measure," said the Sergeant, with a touch of sympathy.

"It takes more than the measure to have them repeated." Maughan's thin face widened into a whimsical smile.

But Prior had already forgotten everything but the stern work that lay ahead.

"We branch off here. . . . That's the Double LF. Anyway, Old man Wampole's safe. . . ."

Quite suddenly the trail swept over a roll and disappeared into a valley in which the light of the fire showed several ranch buildings. Across the curve of the valley the movement of men and horses drew their eyes. Prior's rein hand jerked.

"Well—the damned selfish, old idiot!"

His heels flew out and in and he was off toward the group. Maughan made out two teams of horses dragging ploughs, lashed to wild exertion by shouting cowboys. A third group was centred about another team that leaped and kicked and refused to budge the plough that dragged behind them. Standing to one side, watching the scene, a grizzled old man, red in the face, poured a stream of lurid blasphemy on the struggling cowboys.

He looked up as Sergeant Prior dashed toward him. The Policeman leaped to the ground.

"Wampole, you damned coyote, pile those ploughs on the buckboard and beat it for Whispering Valley. Now move!"

The old man lifted frowning face, seared with unbridled passions, but strong and with no trace of meanness.

"You—go—to—hell! Here, Archie, get Tawny out of that—you know he can't be forced. Try Ginger."

Prior took two steps nearer.

"Do you realize what you're doing, Wampole—holding up three ploughs where they're not needed, and leaving a score of farmers to burn out?"

"Damn the farmers!" shouted Wampole, in a shrill scream. "You don't think I'm going to risk this ranch to save their rotten hides? Not if I know it."

"But the fire's passed you—you're out of danger."

"The wind's been swinging round to the north for an hour. I'm going to save this valley if I have to plough into next week—and be damned to you! I'll pay the costs when it's over, you Police dragoons!"

"You're going to do as I say." The Sergeant was studying the group of cowboys with appraising eye.

"Who's going to make me?" The old man thrust his chin belligerently out, his fiery little eyes snapping defiance.

The Sergeant's right fist leaped forward and caught the convenient chin beside the point, and the greying head jerked up and back and nestled into the grass.

"I hate like sin to strike an old man," growled the Sergeant, "but I haven't time to——"

He leaped aside, one hand moving swiftly to his belt.

"You darn fool!"

At the blow a young man had leaped like a mad thing from the nearest group and flung himself at the policeman. Maughan, before whom the scene had flitted like a moving picture, reached forward and wrapped his long arms about the furious youth. The next instant they were

rolling on the prairie, now one on top, now the other. Maughan found breath to shout:

"Go ahead—Sergeant—I think—I can—keep this quiet."

The Sergeant stepped over to the heaving mass.

"Archie! Archie Wampole!"

But Archie seemed to have lost his head. Perhaps it was the clinging arms of the Englishman, the smothering helplessness that bound his fury down. Over and over the two rolled, but their relation to each other never changed. Archie could not strike, could not break loose, could not even kick, for Maughan's long legs and arms wrapped him in. The Sergeant smiled, even as he kept his face to the cowboys. Drawing a pair of handcuffs from beneath his tunic, he struck young Wampole sharply on the shoulder.

"Will I put the cuffs on you, Archie Wampole? I'm not wasting any more time."

Suddenly Maughan released his hold. The young man heard and understood. With a grunt he rose, looking anxiously to where his father sat, staring about him with dazed eyes. Maughan straightened coat and collar. The Sergeant pointed sternly toward the house. As Archie obeyed, he called back over his shoulder to the cowboys:

"Do as he tells you." There was wounded pride and fierce resentment in his tone.

"You're a bear cat on the hug, sonny," laughed the Sergeant.

"Yes, I can stick a bit," agreed Maughan carelessly.

The old man was sitting up, rubbing his eyes. As the cowboys unhitched and ran the horses back to the buckboard before the stable, Maughan went to him and put an arm about his shoulders. In a few minutes the ploughs were in the buckboard rumbling away to the east. The old man still sat, silently watching the retreating riders. A horse dashed up from the corrals and Wampole looked after it with a chuckle. Slowly he lifted himself to his feet.

"Humph!" he grunted. "That's why I sort of like that Sergeant Prior. Wastes no time getting to the point. Straight out and open—that's how I like 'em. . . . Carries a bit of a jolt in his right, too."

He felt his chin tenderly and screwed up his lips as he touched the sore spot.

"I hope it didn't hurt you," said Maughan politely.

The old man seemed to notice him for the first time.

"Hurt me? Why should it? I guess I can take my medicine with the youngest of them yet." He considered the distant fire. "'Taint coming south, after all. . . . But damn the farmers, just the same." He turned angrily to Maughan. "Now, what the devil are you sticking about here for when there's cattle off there somewhere in danger?"

"I was just waiting till you felt better," Maughan stammered.

"I feel all right—fine!" He shouted it. An elderly woman was hurrying toward them from the ranch house. "Now you run away and get to work on that fire." He turned to the woman. "I've just sent the boys on to Whispering Valley to plough fireguards, Jessie. Somebody's got to save the hides of those blasted farmers."

Maughan mounted sheepishly.

"I say, young man," Wampole called after him. "Drop around and have a bite with us any time. We'll be right glad to see you."

CHAPTER IV

FIGHTING A FIRE

URGING his weary horse eastward in the track of the buckboard, Maughan had time to marvel at one of the terrifying perils to which the prairie dweller is exposed. North and east of him the wall of fire seemed as irresistible as ever, though the first shock of its consuming volume had passed. Behind him for miles lay the smoking path it had left, every wisp of trailing

smoke hungrily tending on in the track of the gale that swept the flames along. Having passed through it, he realized that it had boundaries, and the overpowering nature of its effect was modified. Still he wondered at the impudence of man in seriously setting out to smother that surging, roaring conflagration.

After a time he became aware that he was, at least, overtaking it—at last running level with it—passing it. He felt his horse panting, its stride growing looser and more stumbling, and he remembered the distance they must have come and pulled down to the speed of the fire. Then he began to feel that there was hope. Something—worn trails, fireguards, brush-filled coulees—was holding the fire back: for surely it had been tearing ahead more wantonly when he saw it first from the crest of Toronto Street.

Riding parallel to its course and not far away, he was able to observe its structure more closely, the unhurried completeness of its dominion. The wind seemed a vital part of it, almost a substantial part. The long grass, distinct as day in the light ahead, swayed wildly before the flames and was enveloped while it still seemed safe. Invisibly the fire over-ran it, the heat lapping it up before the roaring blaze reached it. It was a peculiar effect, and Maughan watched it again and again before he could convince himself that his eyes were not deceiving him. Caught by the flames, the grass became but a part of the moving destruction, rising first to a small blaze that rounded backward in thin smoke and was swallowed in the bulging roll of the great cloud borne onward by the driving gale.

It was as strange to see the definite front of the fire as it was to ride suddenly from its southern limits less than an hour before. In a green coulee into which his horse sank he saw how nature itself was fighting for man. Through this the fire picked its way in narrow lines, like an army defiling through a rough valley. It was too impatient to pause for the new growth, and even the green trees, a very few of which had found a footing in

the moister soil, gave up their leaves but nothing else. It looked as if a hundred men, placed strategically in that coulee, could have stopped the fire without much trouble.

Then he came on one of the near-tragedies of prairie fires.

A ramshackle shack built of odds and ends of boards cut and shaped by amateur hands, and a stable even more haphazard, rose before him at the edge of the path the flames were taking. On the far side a field of waving wheat swayed furiously before the gale, but stubbornly refused a path to the flames which were sweeping round on the far side to take up their task beyond. About the house and stable and the solitary stack the regulation fireguard stood out in puny resistance.

This, Maughan knew, must be one of the hated farmers. At first he thought the two flimsy buildings were going to escape. But the fire, impatient to hold its course, crept round on the near side, and as Maughan rode up it leaped the fireguard about the stack and hissed up the loose corner like a display of fireworks.

A man rushed into view from beyond the house where he had been waging a losing fight, and led a team of terrified bronchos, already harnessed, from the stable. A woman appeared, ran to the house and in a few seconds returned bearing a small baby. The man was struggling with the horses, which reared and plunged and snorted and refused to hold their places for the tugs. A few yards away the woman stood bent over the baby, calmly watching the unequal fight. And as Maughan turned in to lend what help he could, a rider dashed by him, leaped from his horse beside the plunging team, and in a few seconds had them hitched. Maughan lifted the woman over the wheel, baby and all, and the buckboard rattled through the thin line of flame that was eating up the grass and had already smothered stack and stable in a golden sheet.

Maughan looked about for their saviour—he realized of how little use he himself would have been with fractious bronchos—but he was nowhere to be seen, though his

horse stood close by. An instant later Archie Wampole dashed from the smoking house with a bundle of bedding in his arms and threw it across his horse. As he leaped into the saddle, scarcely touching the stirrup, the top of a gilt clock protruded from one pocket and a flowered vase from another.

Turning to Maughan with scowling face, he shouted: "Get out of this, you idiot! Are you blind?"

He was gone then, riding furiously, and Maughan, suddenly aware of the danger of his position, spurred after him. As he emerged from the smoke and fire he saw the buckboard careering away in the distance, with young Wampole galloping beside it, dumping the bundle of bedding and emptying his pockets into the woman's lap. Maughan realized with chagrin that while he had been wondering, Archie had leaped in and not only saved the little family, but some of the household treasures as well. He found himself liking the quick-tempered young fellow.

Shortly afterwards he came on the first of the fire-fighters, a short line of cowboys, armed with wet hides and green branches, beating inward along the edge of the flames. Half an hour's ride brought him ahead of the flames again and within sight of a wide, shallow valley wherein nestled several shacks. The floor of the valley was dotted with irregular patches of cultivation, but in through it ran wide swaths of dead grass, the tinder on which the oncoming fire fed. Along the lip of the valley a dozen ploughs worked furiously to yelling drivers. Here—it must be Whispering Valley—they were to make their stand. Maughan spurred his flagging horse across the path of the fire to the north side.

He knew then that the fire had narrowed. It roared along toward him with the old terror, wind and heat striking him almost unbearably, but its impetus was lessened by the confining of its boundaries. As he came out on the other side he saw the reason. The men Inspector Barker had collected on the street before the

opera house back in Medicine Hat were lined along the edge of the burning grass, disappearing back into the cloud of smoke. At their head he fell in line with his sacking, turning his tired horse loose.

Choking, coughing, smothered with dust and smoke and thirst, gasping with the searing heat and aching muscles, unrecognizable through their grime, half a hundred men beat and beat in an ingrowing line along the margin. Some lay exhausted as they had fallen—a dozen of the weaker, whose lungs were unfitted for a strain like this. A buckboard dashed up, rocking and swaying, and a cloud of children scattered from it with dippers and tin cups of water for the fighters. Eyes bloodshot, arms so numb they could scarcely raise them to their lips, tongues hanging, staggering blindly as they momentarily broke the routine of their panting task, they swallowed but a gulp or two and fell again into the fight like machines that knew only one movement. . . .

Half an hour later Maughan, heading the line, came to the freshly-ploughed fireguard at the edge of the valley. The score of cowboys on the other side, and the army at the north, had succeeded in cutting down the path of the fire until it no longer looked formidable. Beyond the fireguard, Sergeant Prior, his voice a mere aching rasp, had marshalled a third line of fighters, and as the sparks blew across they beat them out viciously, with a brutal fury, as if they were living enemies. Round, mouthing oaths poured from their lips, as the sweat from their faces. There they would win or die. Back of them lay the sweetest farming valley in a hundred miles, constricted and formless, as yet but a promise of the future. On beyond ranged ten thousand cattle. . . .

The battle was won. Maughan wiped his blackened face on a blacker handkerchief, staggered away in search of his horse, and having unsaddled it, dropped on the saddle and slept.

As the sun slid over the crest of the Cypress Hills he clambered stiffly to his feet and looked about him. The

democrats had already started back to town. Only a few cowboys and farmers, two distinct groups again, remained on the scene of the struggle. Some of them recognized the cut of his riding breeches, the long, sombre lines of his lean face, and they grinned in a not unfriendly way.

"Speakin' as a friend," shouted one, "a bath wouldn't hurt you about now."

"Speaking as a Westerner," replied Maughan, "the first thing I do is to get my teeth into a juicy steak."

"That's the dope, old sport. Make a cowboy of you yet, Sparrow."

"Perhaps you'll have the chance," Maughan waved, starting wearily off on the long course back to town.

CHAPTER V

A MEETING

A RAVENOUS breakfast after a hasty washing of hands and face—a luxurious bath—a sleep that lasted far into the afternoon—and Maughan felt as if he were ready for anything. Dressed now in a coarse tweed outing suit of Norfolk coat and baggy knickers that ended in heavy woollen stockings and thick-soled walking shoes, he tramped slowly down the hotel stairs, his eyes searching the group seated in the rotunda.

Not finding what he wanted, he passed through the short hallway to the right and stood on the top of the steps leading down into the bar. A crowd was gathered there, and they looked up at him, amused, teasing, interested. A cowboy lounged against the counter near the door, his back to the steps. Maughan's eyes rested on him, then he came slowly down through the laughing groups and paused beside him. The cowboy turned, and a wide smile spread over his face.

"I was looking for you," Maughan said. "We're going to that baseball game to-night."

"Good!" The cowboy shifted about to the counter. His face was a little flushed, and his voice raised unnecessarily. "Heuh, Bill, two whiskies."

Maughan looked straight into his new friend's flushed eyes.

"Do you think you'd better?"

The cowboy's forehead contracted and his face went redder. The immediate group stopped talking, a look of expectancy turned to the daring stranger.

"By cripes!" exploded the cowboy angrily.

Then as Maughan's face showed no sign of his danger, he laughed suddenly. "Say, old hoss, I like yoh. Yoh take awful chances without turnin' a hair. And yoh right, by cripes, yoh right. I've had enough."

"You see, you're taking me in hand to-night——"

"I know, I know. A fellow's got to be sobuh to tackle a job like that. The stuff a fellow guzzles in this baw— Well, I'll meet you on the veranda at a qua'tuh to seven."

"No, I've been counting all day on having you dine with me. You won't disappoint me."

The cowboy squirmed and hesitated. He wanted to accept, a little proud to be singled out in the crowded bar, but shy withal.

"My guest," insisted Maughan.

"I thank yoh," said the cowboy, bowing.

As they passed back to the door by which Maughan had entered, a loose, fat, tubby man with a flickering eye pulled the cowboy up.

"I hear Archie's in town," he said in a voice not too low for Maughan to hear. "If you see him tell him we'll be holding the table in the corner for him to-night. It's his turn." . . .

Maughan and the cowboy had been sitting on the veranda almost an hour when the early dinner bell rang. Maughan excused himself in quest of a forgotten handkerchief, while the cowboy dived for the washroom to give

himself a final slicking up. Five minutes later they entered the dining-room.

Within the screen door—that kept the flies in as well as out—Maughan faltered. It was a mere pause, so imperceptible, indeed, that his guest, casting shy glances toward the table where the cowboys usually dined, thought the collision that resulted his own fault. Three of the eight seats at the table were occupied by a young man and two girls. Maughan wondered why he should falter at that. But certainly his heart was beating a trifle faster as he moved round the table to his own end seat and directed his cowboy friend to the chair on his right.

Though he carefully avoided looking, he sensed something familiar about the man, even while his interest was absorbed in the two girls. A voice he recognized as Archie Wampole's threw a careless "Hello, Tex!" across to his cowboy companion, and when Maughan permitted his eyes to rest casually on the other end of the table he was rewarded by an unmistakable frown.

Tex grunted an embarrassed reply and turned to bow shyly to the two girls. Maughan, following his friend's eyes, found himself regarded by the girl on Wampole's right in a peculiarly penetrating way—not impertinently or even coyly, but merely interestedly. The instant she saw herself observed, she turned to Tex with a smile and a word of greeting.

The interest of the girl on the other side of the table was less subtle, more studied. She was watching Maughan frankly, and only after an embarrassing crossing of their eyes did she drop hers coyly behind long lashes. Maughan decided immediately that she could be ignored.

A waitress, her hair piled in a high pompadour, rushed through the swing kitchen doors and placed a plate of soup before Maughan and his companion, stooping impatiently for their meat orders. The three at the other end of the table had resumed their conversation.

Tex was obviously unhappy. He had shied at the thought of dining with a stranger; with the two girls

at the same table his shyness amounted to pain. He gulped at his soup, eyes fixed on his plate, choked at the third spoonful, wiped his hand across his mouth, and in his confusion addressed himself to Archie Wampole.

"Just saw Mason, Archie. Told me to tell you he's expectin' yoh to-night."

He flushed at the end, as if realizing the mistake he had made.

Archie greeted the message with a quick scowl.

"That's all right, Tex," he said, with elaborate indifference.

Furtively and somewhat fearfully he glanced at the girl on his right, who fixed him with that unconsciously delving gaze of hers and then returned to her eating. Archie, with a youthful fling of bravado, laughed. But a feeling of constraint lay over the table.

From beneath the sheltering rim of the bread plate a cockroach sprinted out on the white cloth, paused to make a few inquisitive gestures with its feelers, and started on a drunken course toward Maughan. With a movement of repulsion he swept it away with his napkin, but in his nervousness his aim was bad; the creature regained its feet close to the plate of the girl in whom he was so unaccountably interested. Murmuring an apology, he reached across and brushed it far out on the floor.

When, flushed and uncomfortable, he lifted his eyes, he found her studying him with some amusement.

"I'm so sorry," he stammered.

Then, aware of the thunder cloud on Archie Wampole's face, he added formally: "I've such a stupid horror of the things. It was very clumsy of me."

The cloud vanished. With a boyish laugh Archie waved his hand.

"S'all right, all right. Nobody hurt. They aren't additions to a meal."

Tex felt that something was expected of him.

"Archie, shake hands with a friend of mine, Mr.—
Mr.——"

"Claude Maughan," the friend filled in. "You see, Tex and I have met only twice. It was love at first sight, I believe."

"Shore!" grinned Tex. "Liked yoh the moment I clapped eyes on yoh yeste'day lopin' up from South Railway Street."

Maughan bowed to Archie as if they had not met before. He had no thought of mentioning the incident of last night. But Archie, whose dislike was so boyishly patent, could not let it pass.

"Mr Maughan and I have sort of met," he explained to his companions. "Last night, out at the ranch during the fire. Mr. Maughan came to put it out for us."

He thrust his hand out with a laugh.

"Beastly nuisance, too, losing an hour or so's sleep over a bally little thing like that," drawled Maughan, rising to round the table toward the extended greeting. "You old-timers must learn to do these simple things for yourselves."

He was looking straight into the eyes of the girl on Wampole's right, and his words petered out meaninglessly. He felt Wampole snatch his hand away, and in some confusion he returned to his seat.

"Julia!" said Wampole coldly. "Miss Kingsley—Mr. Maughan."

"Julia"—so that was her name! Maughan bowed to the reflective, scrutinizing smile—and wondered if his tie was straight.

"Miss Claire Kingsley."

Maughan acknowledged the existence of the coy one on the other side—and Claire's long lashes came into play as she greeted him in a throaty musical voice.

"I'm not going to ask you what you think of Medicine Hat, Mr. Maughan," said Julia, "or of the natural gas. I haven't a foot of land I'd sell you. But it is unfortunate that you should get your earliest impressions through the Provincial Hotel. The things you have such a horror of are not indigenous to the town; they're a speciality of

the hotel. The Provincial is our worst—our first, unfortunately—advertisement.”

“You might call a meeting of the Board of Trade,” suggested Claire slyly, “and explain to the eminent visitor, Mr. Claude Maughan, of London, England——”

At the pucker of Maughan’s forehead Julia broke in with a laugh.

“Everyone knows where you come from, Mr. Maughan. They have only to read the register. It’s the penalty of being a stranger in a boom town. It irritates them that in two weeks they know nothing more.”

“I can add something to satisfy your sister, at least,” said Maughan soberly. “I assure her that I’m *not* eminent. I can also assure her that no explanations are necessary to me. Every day I’m discovering new beauties in the town.”

“Oh, how perfectly sweet of you!” Claire gushed, rewarding him with a languishing look.

Julia’s smile was slow behind her straight lids.

“You two speak as one newcomer to another. Claire’s almost as much of a tenderfoot as you. She’s only making fun of our habit of expecting every stranger to say something nice about us and then calling him eminent. The nicer the thing he says, the more eminent he is.”

There was something protective in her tone, as if she recognized the unfairness of teasing such a kindly disposed tenderfoot as Maughan. He thrilled to it.

“If your sister will arrange the meeting, Miss Kingsley, I’m destined to be the most eminent visitor Medicine Hat ever had.”

He said it so gravely that they scarcely knew whether to laugh or not. Julia’s colour heightened, for he was looking directly at her.

“It’s the newspapers you should say such things to, Mr. Maughan,” she bantered. “Women out here aren’t accustomed to it.”

“I’m from the East,” Claire simpered, with a flutter of her eyes.

The conversation died there as suddenly as it had begun. Archie Wampole was scowling at the tablecloth, determined not to be drawn into another word. Jealousy was written in every line and attitude, and Julia glanced at him in her thoughtful way. The table resolved itself into its two groups. Maughan, even as he exchanged inanities with Tex, wondered how he had come to smash every tradition of his country and converse with strangers. The Western air, he decided.

His interest in the other end of the table did not abate. Try as he might he could not dissociate himself from it. Following the general conversation an awkward silence fell on the three. Archie had returned to his meal. Julia, on the other hand, was merely pecking at things, thoughtful and remote. Claire slyly watched first one and then the other with unconcealed amusement—almost with ridicule.

Suddenly Archie turned to Julia with a flash of irritation.

"Tex was just pulling your leg."

"Really?" indifferently. "Does it matter enough to make sure?"

"It *should* matter," he protested sulkily.

"It does—really . . . only I was letting it pass. Since you told me how impossible it was for you to come round to-night—and I had refused an invitation because I expected you—it seemed to me, too, that it should matter."

"I don't see why I have to account for every hour."

"You don't, Archie. . . . But there are certain obligations when I expect you."

He recognized the justice of that with a fling of his hands.

"All right, dear, I'm not going to start in lying to you so early. I planned to have a little game with the boys—friends of mine."

She made no reply, but a guilty conscience drove him on hurriedly:

"Of course, Mason isn't such a friend of mine—nor the others either—not really. But there's a bunch of us meets

now and then for a game—just for the fun of it——” He stopped there, frowning thoughtfully at his plate.

Tex bent slightly toward Maughan and whispered:

“Pretty spo’tin’ of Archie, I call it.”

And Maughan realized that the cowboy was listening as intently as he.

Julia was smiling indifferently, but Maughan, glancing from beneath his brows, thought he saw signs that the indifference was only superficial.

“Hadn’t you better let me keep some of your money for you, Archie—so the fun won’t be too costly?” she suggested idly, picking up her dessert spoon.

Archie Wampole flared up. “Oh, I’m able to look after myself,” he blustered.

She winced at tone and words.

“Please, Archie! There’s no need for the room to hear. I didn’t mean that. I know nothing about your games.”

Claire laid a sympathetic hand on the young man’s sleeve and reproved her sister playfully.

“Not at meals, Julia. You’ll ruin his digestion, and then I’ll have to nurse him.”

Tone and words were light enough, but there was something more behind it.

“Darn sight worse things than that,” Archie muttered, with a grateful grin.

“Perhaps you’d like to take him right into your hospital, Claire,” said Julia sharply. “I have no doubt your sympathy is a wonderful tonic for Archie . . . but I have to live with him.”

“You don’t have to,” Archie blurted out, and then looked frightened.

Julia’s reply was increasingly cold:

“Just a little uncalled for, Archie, don’t you think? I suppose I’m picking my words badly. Naturally I felt it a little that a game of cards——”

“To blazes with the cards!” he broke in, suddenly contrite. “I’m coming up to see you.”

“Oh, no, you’re not.”

"Never mind, Archie," said Claire sweetly. "When you're married, sister-in-law'll live next door and have the arnica and pepsin ready."

"Don't be silly, Claire," was Julia's short retort.

Maughan was straining his ears to every word—and thoroughly ashamed of himself. He was somewhat hazy about the meaning of the scene. As he continued his conversation with Texas, another part of his brain turned over and over what he had heard. The one outstanding fact was that Julia Kingsley and Archie Wampole were engaged, quite frankly engaged; the diamond ring on her third finger was explained. Had it been Claire instead of Julia, with her bold, plump beauty and studied witcheries of eye and smile and word, he could have understood better. But Julia, with her calm, discerning, dignified ways, was so much the opposite of the fiery young man that their relationship puzzled Maughan. Archie, beside her, was a petulant, spoiled child, weak and quick-tempered and reckless. His girlish, sensitive lips, full and too prettily bowed for a man, above an equally sensitive chin, fought the full, wide forehead and flashing eyes above. He was two young men in one, and Maughan rather liked the bold recklessness of the one, as he forgave the youthful foolishness of the other.

Claire, the younger of the two sisters, might have been something of a beauty had she not over-rated and over-used her beauty marks. The very frankness of her methods was a sign of the superficiality of her knowledge of life's deeper experiences. Plump—almost too plump—rounded everywhere, with a wealth of bosom and fulness of neck that had served their innocent turn in a thousand personal experiences, she was practised in all the obvious arts of the flirt. Her long lashes, by practice, worked almost instinctively. And as a foil, she did her fair hair with studied simplicity, parted in the middle and brought back loosely over the ears to a roll low on her neck. Her hat, a plain felt one, was dinged and bent and tilted to the exact shape and angle that suited her best. Her dress was cut

a trifle low in front—deliberately—but an instinctive modesty made her constantly hitch it back on her shoulders, a movement that irritated Maughan.

Maughan was more interested in Julia, but for some time he found it impossible to study her because she was obviously studying him. Her hair was almost unnaturally black, with the gloss of energy and vivid life. Claire's, soft and languidly wavy—Julia's, crisply rippled—it was the two sisters betrayed by their hair. But it was Julia's skin and eyes that attracted him. Her skin was brown, foreign, but with a transparent, warm colouring and fineness of texture that alone makes a brown skin so attractive. It was as if a fine silken veil were drawn over the girl's throbbing flesh, hiding the depths of her from unobserving eyes. But the eyes of her—Maughan looked and looked again. They were black to the edge of the iris from where he sat, compelling, with a power of which she seemed totally unconscious. Long and almond shaped, they gave the impression of lifting slightly at the outer corners in an Oriental way, an effect heightened by a corresponding tilt to the ends of her black brows. The upper lids were curiously straight and intruded themselves at times before the upper third of the iris, giving her a speculative, delving expression that must have troubled the conscience of a reckless youth like Archie Wampole.

Maughan looked from Julia to her fiancé. He had seen enough of life to form no hard-and-fast rules about mating, but surely this. . . .

He caught Archie seizing an inattentive moment to scowl darkly on Texas. Three minutes later he noted a quick negative shake of the head thrown across the dining-room toward the travellers' table, where a red-faced, asthmatic knight of the road, partially hidden behind a diamond pin in a green tie, lifted his eyes in annoyed surprise. Maughan guessed who was to have been one of the "friends" in "the little game."

Then the three who had thrust themselves into Maughan's life so disturbingly rose, bowed with varying degrees of

cordiality, and went out. Tex brought him out of a long silence.

"'Ere, 'Arry, me lad! Shaike yer j'int's, me 'earty, if we're to see this 'ere blinkin' gaine. . . . Which same is a language you shore ought to unduhstand."

Maughan smiled his intimate smile and pushed back his chair.

CHAPTER VI

THE DUST STORM

"**A**RCHIE WAMPOLE don't seem nohow to cotton to yoh, old hoss," mused Texas, as they climbed the wire fence at the foot of Toronto Street in a short cut across the railway tracks toward the baseball grounds.

Maughan paused to avoid the yard engine, and when it had passed, ran to overtake his companion.

"And Archie," continued Texas, "is shore some cuss to get down on yoh."

"But why should he be down on me? That black beetle incident surely wouldn't justify that . . . and the little affair last night. . . ."

He told Texas the story of his struggle on the prairie at the Double LF, and the cowboy chuckled.

"I know Archie—he's my best friend in these pawts. And ce'tainly I know when he's not feelin' joyous. . . . And he wasn't what yoh might call happy at the table, was he? . . . No, it's not the fight—Archie's too good a spo't foh that, though he'd feel a bit sore about it happenin' befoh the boys—and yoh bein' a tenduhfoot would make a lot of difference. But I don't believe it's quite that . . . and I'm ce'tain it ain't the cockroach . . . not exactly the cockroach, though it might—it might have had something to do with it."

He was mumbling his thoughts aloud. Suddenly he turned to Maughan and said gravely:

"Yoh weren't makin' eyes at the gals, were you? I wouldn't laugh, 'cause Archie's apt to blow up and act ugly when he's jealous . . . and I've taken yoh in hand to break yoh to the saddle, and I don't want to have to buck Archie. If it came to a showdown between yoh and Archie. . . . Well, I guess it would have to be Archie. We're old friends, Archie and me."

"Why, of course, Tex," laughed Maughan. "You'll never be put to the test."

"You see, Archie's got two gals there. . . . One's to be his wife and the othuh his sist'-in-law. So't of a family lien. I'd look elsewhere, if I was yoh."

"The Miss Kingsleys aren't of the slightest interest to me," said Maughan carelessly.

"Humph!" grunted Texas.

Not another word did they exchange during the fifteen minutes' walk to the baseball grounds. Maughan was wrapped in his thoughts, Texas watched him from the corner of his eye. As they slid down the cinder bank from the railway and made for the gates, Tex broke into a short laugh.

"Cripes, but yoh a gassuh."

"Sorry, Tex. That's my way—I get lost in myself and forget to talk."

"Well, all I got to say is yoh shore don't want to forget yohself in these pawts. It ain't healthy foh a tenduhfoot."

"I guess I'm not a bit Western. I don't understand——"

"Son," said Texas, stopping to place his hand on the other's arm, "yoh take my advice and get so Western yoh've got a howl like a coyote and a breath like a chinook—with a bit of the rip-rarin' devil of a year-old at round-up. And do it pronto. . . . It's been a heluva fifteen minutes," he sighed.

He elbowed his way good-naturedly through the crowd before the wicket.

"Heuh, Bill, two royal box tickets for me and King Eddy. He's rootin' round for a Windsor Castle team.

Pass the wo'd along to the boys. We want to see a real game."

In the crowded grandstand he heaved and pushed a place for the two of them immediately in the centre, behind the plate. Maughan kept close to his heels, apologizing profusely, wondering when the whole stand would rise against them, but never losing his position. He breathed more freely when they were seated, Big Bill Duke, Mayor of Medicine Hat, overhanging him on the left.

The Twilight League baseball game that night in Medicine Hat matters not to the story. That it was not a bad game may be imagined from the fact that four of the players engaged graduated at the end of the season directly to the Big Leagues. Maughan found it after the first moments of bewilderment, intensely interesting, especially in its effect on the spectators. For half an innings he could scarcely follow the game for the excessive excitement about him, then a huge youth came into the box for Medicine Hat, to loud shouts of "Give it to 'em, Works," "Eat 'em up, Works," "Don't let 'em see first." A nervous player waved a club in his hand and seemed to be finding everywhere but where the ball was. And behind him crouched a bent little old fellow with an eye on every move in the game and a cheery or warning word for every player.

Tex possessed a voice that slit through every other sound, and Bill Duke was a foghorn gone amuck. Maughan felt somewhat helpless, and looked about him to see if he was as isolated as he felt. Behind him he saw the Kingsley sisters and Archie Wampole. Julia caught his eye with a twinkling smile of amusement. Archie scowled at him frankly.

In a pause between innings he was aware of many an eye turned toward the sky to the north-west. With a start he noted there the first cloud he had seen since his arrival, a jet black blot extending in a long curve below the sinking sun and already shedding a strangely tinted shadow over the opposite cutbank. It rose as he watched

and blotted out the lower arc of the sun. And suddenly Maughan felt alarmed. Tex was watching it, even as the game proceeded.

"Bit of a hailstorm," he explained. "Won't hu't us, even if it gets this fah. Hits the fa'muhs like blazes, Gawd bless it!" Then he returned to the game.

A Medicine Hat batsman had connected with the ball and was rushing from first to second as the ball returned with a vicious snap from deep centre field.

"Slide, yoh sonofabitch!" yelled Tex, standing and working his clenched fists up and down.

Maughan touched him on the arm.

"Tex, Tex!" And as the cowboy turned unseeing eyes down on him: "I wouldn't say that. There are women here."

A sudden silence had fallen over the stand with the retirement of the player, and Maughan's warning was plainly heard. The crowd had long been conscious of the presence of an ununderstanding stranger and was watching him with amusement. The silence was broken by a loud voice from behind, aping the stage conception of the "classy" Englishman:

"Mah deah—aw—chappie, why didn't you—aw—cawst yourself on your bally wes'cut and raise a beastly dust, doncher know?"

The crowd howled, and Maughan, recognizing Archie Wampole's voice, registered one against him.

The black cloud rose rapidly until it was almost overhead, a disturbing, threatening chill about it that made players and spectators nervous. The west was black as night, the white chimneys and walls of the town standing up against it like waiting ghosts. The gloom over the grounds deepened. The captains and the umpire conferred, but Medicine Hat was ahead and neither wished to stop, for the fifth innings was just starting.

Maughan heard Claire, behind him, speaking with nervous sharpness:

"I'm not going to risk it any longer, Julia. I don't

propose to get caught in a hailstorm out here. Why, there isn't a bit of cover."

"Very well, Claire," Julia replied easily. "Run along. Archie will go with you."

"It's going to be a bruiser when it comes," decided Archie, after a moment's pause. "Better come along, Julia," a little coldly.

"I'm not going," said Julia.

"I am." Claire was really angry and frightened now; Maughan heard her rise from her seat.

"I'll tell you about the game when I come home," Julia laughed. "Archie will look after you, won't you, Archie?"

Maughan heard Archie rise with a petulant movement. All over the stand groups had broken away and were running for the gates. Archie hesitated.

"Trot along, Archie. I'm all right. Rain can't hurt these clothes. I'm going to see the last ball pitched. We can't let Claire go alone."

With a smothered exclamation the young man ran along the emptying stand to overtake Claire, and Maughan saw them hurrying after the frightened crowd. With a sudden thought he looked about him and noticed that Julia was the only woman left. But she was leaning forward unconcernedly, her chin supported on a hand that rested on her crossed knees, watching Works curving the ball across the plate. Scores of men were equally intent on the game, heedless of the approaching storm.

A vivid streak of flame split the black cloud, followed by a crash of a mountain of rock showering on a hollow floor. Almost before he thought Maughan clambered back, and took his seat beside Julia Kingsley. And Tex stood on the other side. The remaining spectators had risen to their feet, and with one accord the players rushed for the dressing rooms. Maughan looked off curiously toward the town and saw the running forms dotted over the trail and the railway tracks. Tex was standing with

eyes fixed on the horizon and beneath the centre of the cloud.

"Heuh," he jerked, seizing Julia's arm and lifting her to her feet. "We got to clear out of this."

In the direction Tex had been staring Maughan saw a thick grey sheet lift from the ground, its edges coiling inward, its crest rounding slowly to a blunt point. With an appearance of lazy, sportive relentlessness it came rolling toward them—over the crest of the distant cut-bank—dropping down its side to the floor of the valley—shutting out the town as it advanced. A whine rose like a terrified scream, echoed in the gasps of hundreds of surprised throats. A hurricane of wind roared down on them, shrilling through the wires. It flicked a half dozen boards from the high fence, it toppled over the bandstand like a castle of toy blocks. Nothing now but blank greyness stood before them like a wall.

"Dust storm!" yelled Texas.

He was half carrying, half leading Julia, whose skirt clung so tight in the wind that she could scarcely move. But Maughan, following closely, heard her laugh into the blast of the storm.

They had but dropped over the end of the grandstand away from the oncoming fury when it was on them. They were in a small rectangle formed by the stand, the outer fence, and two gates admitting the players to the grounds from the dressing rooms at the back. Twenty others cowered there, and the gates were closed. Tex and Maughan got Julia into a corner and stood over her. Then the dust struck them.

In five seconds they realized the trap they were in. The dust, whirling blindly, roared over three sides and fell on them like a solid thing, a choking, merciless blanket. It clogged their nostrils and filled their throats, and they dare not open their eyes. Like a million needles it bit into the flesh. A score of cornered men gasped for breath and with every gasp choked the worse. A few shrieked in their fear and suffering. Maughan tore off his coat

and wrapped it about Julia's head, though he was staggering with suffocation. The strong arm of Texas reached over him and took hold of the girl.

"Over the fence!" he shouted.

With a heave he tore Maughan aside, lifted Julia above his head, and plunged through the cowering crowd in the narrow space. Maughan, seized of his plan in time, threw himself over the seven-foot fence and held up his arms to receive the burden Tex dropped into them.

It was easier out there in the open, with a fence between them and the direct attack of the dust. Maughan held Julia close against the boards, adding his vest to the coat that protected her head. Beside him Tex frankly pulled his flannel shirt from his chaps and gripped it over his face. All about them men cursed and gasped and groaned. . . .

How long it lasted they did not know; time was judged by the agony of it. Then the rain burst over them like a flood and changed the loose dust to mud. But the wind continued to howl. Lightning played like an electric display gone mad, and the thunder crashed through the roar of the wind and the slashing beat of the rain.

Julia uncovered her head and smiled up at Maughan. She handed back coat and vest, standing unconcerned in the stinging drops that were playing havoc with dress and hat. Tex pulled down his shirt and puffed with relief. They climbed back over the fence the way they had come, but more carefully for Julia's sake, and sought the dressing room beneath the grandstand.

"I say, this is a country!" Maughan exclaimed, and his eyes flashed a new joy. "A prairie fire—a dust storm—and—and lots of things, all crowded into twenty-four hours!"

Julia threw him a quick, inquiring look, but said nothing. Texas had disappeared.

CHAPTER VII

AFTER THE DUST STORM

HALF an hour later Maughan and Julia Kingsley stepped briskly into the vivid light of evening. Julia was laughing—a little nervously. Maughan was silent and sober.

As they picked their way across the field toward the gate through a sea of mud and water the silence continued. In the gateway the rut of many feet was now a solid pond. He held out his hand, but she leaped lightly over alone. And as she landed in the outer edge of the pool and the dirty water splashed about her, she laughed, a sudden, chuckling sound that made Maughan glance at her wonderingly.

"After all, why not walk frankly through it?" she quizzed, with twinkling eyes, making a sweep of her shapely hands over her soiled clothes. "I couldn't be worse—unless I was you," she added, taking in his discoloured, shapeless tweeds. She ended by plumping her foot squarely in the middle of a puddle and standing there while she laughed again in her explosive way.

It was an infectious sound, and Maughan looked down at himself with a grin. The heavy, coarse tweed was loaded with dust that had turned to a greasy paste with the rain. The knickers hung at the knees as if they were weighted, and the Norfolk coat dragged miserably on his shoulders. A ragged tear in one knee recorded his reckless speed to scale the fence in time to catch her—in his arms. (He remembered that so distinctly.) Collar and tie and shirt had merged into an uneven surface of dark grey with unexpected streaks in it. Every pore of his body seemed clogged with dirt.

But when he considered Julia his grin turned to a laugh that echoed hers. The silk dress that had seemed such an essential part of her attractiveness at first, he thought,

now hung like a rag, the original colour a matter of doubt. His heavy tweed coat had crushed most of the shape from her hat, and what was left had been attended to by the rain. Only a couple of inches of the once white buck shoes showed above the puddle in which she stood, and they were white no longer. From hat to shoes long, irregular lines of shaded grey gave her a ridiculous, haphazard appearance, like a mannikin splashed with thin paint or a grotesque pierrette.

When she caught him looking at her hat she tore it off with a sudden, nervous movement and stepped quickly from her foolish stand in the puddle.

"It doesn't matter," he murmured, and looked away. And both were flushed a little.

For it had suddenly come to him that her dress and her shoes and her hat and her rippling hair did not count at all. There still remained Julia Kingsley and that penetrating, understanding gaze and the level eyes and the thin brown skin and the uptilted brows and . . .

"I suggest that we don't look at each other," he said gravely. "A purely selfish suggestion."

"I suppose your—Bond Street training will dismiss it as essentially Western," she replied, flinging up her chin, "if I say that I don't care a—a hoot. Well, I don't."

"I noticed the hat," he could not help retorting.

For just a moment she did not reply, then, lightly:

"Rather a decent little hat, too, for a home-brew."

"A decidedly decent little hat," he agreed. And they both laughed.

For several minutes they proceeded in silence.

"Good old cockroach!" she murmured, looking up at him sideways.

He winced. In his experience cockroaches—black beetles, as they were to him—were not topics of polite conversation. She read him aright.

"Well, wasn't it that little horror browsing about on the Provincial table that saved my life half an hour ago? If you hadn't been——"

"But it was Tex saved your life. I hung about to have my own saved. I've never been in a dust storm before and I didn't know the antidote."

"Neither have I. . . . You'd probably have found the antidote in time."

He considered her soberly.

"I never knew before how pleasant it was to be thought a hero—even undeservedly. The sensation decides the future course of a kaleidoscopic life. You see, I've grown accustomed to being the—the goat, you call it, don't you?"

"If you *will* wear those clothes you can't expect to be anything else in Western Canada."

He glanced down at himself. "Please try to remember them as they were before the dust storm, Miss Kingsley. They were provided by one of the biggest Colonial outfitters in London."

"That accounts for it. On a visit I paid to England a couple of years ago I learned a lot about my own country, that I had never suspected, though I've lived in it for twenty-five years."

"Oh!" he said politely.

The corners of her mouth were twitching. "Yes, that's my age. Uninteresting, isn't it?"

He coughed.

"Where you English deceive yourselves most is in treating the distant parts of the Empire as distinct little worlds that require special preparation. I could walk over most of London and, so far as dress is concerned, never realize that I was not in Toronto."

"Rather a decent little suit of tweeds, too, for a foreign brew," he said slyly.

She laughed with him. "But even England wouldn't pass them now. . . . And so you can start right now to be Western."

"I believe—I'll have a try."

"I believe—you'll succeed," she mimicked.

"Good old cockroach!" he mused.

"Now you're reasonable. It's far more flattering to agree than to be shocked—as you were when I said it."

"But I was bound to meet you," he murmured, frowning at the muddy trail. "I mean——" he stammered. As he glanced awkwardly down at her his eyes alighted on her left hand.

"Why, your ring is gone!"

She jerked the hand behind her and shifted so that he could not see her face. Without a word she ploughed steadily on through the mud.

"To be frank," she said presently, "I was just as frightened as Claire, but I knew you and Tex would look after me."

Maughan struggled to follow the sequence of her thoughts.

She continued: "Archie had to go with her. She's only a visitor. Archie would take care of her; he's an old-timer."

"And yet you were willing to trust yourself to a tenderfoot?"

"There was Texas."

"Hang and quarter Texas! I thought we'd agreed that I saved your life."

"That was merely for purposes of hero-worship," she returned lightly.

The unpaved trail ahead to the railway station was almost deserted. They had not yet reached the houses, and on their right, away from the railway tracks, the stretch of vacant lots was cluttered with marks of the recent storm. Every sign of passing wheels was blotted from the trail in mud and water, and only a footmark appeared here and there, the returning crowd having clung to the grass at the edge. The air was crystal clear again, the sun just above the edge of the cutbank. In another half hour the sudden Western evening would drop like a veil. Every line of the town was sharp as a drawing. They stopped and looked about them.

To the south, across the tracks, the town climbed

"Your sister's in the baggage room, Miss Kingsley. She's in rather a bad way from the storm. Been telephoning to your place."

A sudden flash shot into Julia's eyes and disappeared; somehow they seemed to harden.

"Claire? In there?"

She glanced at Maughan and hurried toward the baggage room.

They found Claire, bedraggled, half weeping, wholly angry, seated disconsolately on a trunk the baggage master had turned on its side for her. At sight of Julia she gave a low cry and ran to meet her. In that instant every shadow of hardness vanished from the elder sister's eyes and she gathered Claire into her arms like a mother. Then, having soothed her back to self-control, she held her away and laughed at the mess the storm had left. For if Julia was marked with dust and rain, Claire was enormously worse. The only comparatively clear spots on her were immediately below either eye, where tears had washed a channel for themselves.

"Archie is bringing your clothes?" said Julia, scarcely as a question.

Claire burst into a gust of weeping.

"I—I don't know—where he is. He—he left me—right in the middle of the storm—and he hasn't—come back."

The laughter in Julia's face died, leaving it graver and more thoughtful than ever. A little impatiently she dropped her hands on her weeping sister's shoulders and shook her.

"Listen, listen, Claire. Stop crying. What do you mean?"

Her tone was firm, but her eyes swept round in a slow circle as if appealing in a panic to Maughan for help.

"He should have returned before this, whether he was lost or not," she murmured, as if only for Maughan's ears.

Maughan turned on the baggage master and hustled him from his own room, sliding the door shut after him.

"I thought you—you'd know where he was," wailed Claire. "He's lost, I know he is." A fresh gush of tears stopped her.

"See here, Claire." Julia's hand still pressed on her sister's shoulder, and her tone was firm. "I want to hear about this, not your crying. If you don't stop this hysterics I'll throw that pail of dirty water over you." She pointed to the row of fire pails in their rings on the wall.

Claire sniffled to quietness.

"And, don't you think, Claire, that if anything has happened to Archie Wampole, *I'm* the one to do the weeping?"

CHAPTER VIII

ARCHIE. WAMPOLE DISAPPEARS

CLAIRE KINGSLEY was not too frightened, as she left the baseball field before the approaching dust storm, to experience a certain amount of elation. A feeling of having won a victory, as she thrust her hand into Archie Wampole's arm, to some extent drowned her panic in the face of the threatening cloud to which they set their faces. And death alone would strip her of the tricks of the flirt. The little tiffs of lovers were no new experience to her; she practised them herself as one of the arrows in her quiver of love, and certainly the weeks of her visit to her sister had done nothing to convince her that other couples were immune from them.

But she knew, too, how uncertain are the victories of love's intruders, the third side in love's triangle; and it was with some trepidation that she seized her chaperon's arm and pulled him onward to the gate in an effort to monopolize his thoughts. She was not surprised, therefore, at the unresponsiveness of Archie Wampole's arm. Indeed, ever since the little scene at the Provincial dining table he had been unusually morose and silent, his one ebullition occurring in the grandstand at the expense of the English-

man. So she only squeezed his arm the tighter and dragged him on.

Claire was not unsisterly. She would have flirted with her sister's husband, with a brother had she had one. The little display of sex was to her the very breath of life, the one outstanding expression of herself sacrificed on the altar of the male. Julia had been a mother to her since their own mother died, and in the ordinary things of life Claire was ready enough to acknowledge it with an almost filial devotion. But for the purpose of the moment Julia was but a rival woman, and Archie a man. Also, deep within her she felt that Julia scarcely appreciated the fine young fellow who was going to give her his name.

Far ahead of them the frightened spectators who had sacrificed their tickets and an almost hysterical interest in the local team's success hurried along the trail or the railway track toward the town. Their own delay, in recognition of Julia's claims to attention, had placed them the last in the procession, and Claire looked into the black cloud and behind her with renewed fear and a feeling of hopeless isolation.

Instinctively her grasp of her escort's arm tightened, and in response to the expression of trust he squeezed her fingers to him and looked down on her with the pleasure every man feels when he has a woman to protect. Settling his Stetson tighter on his head he placed his free hand on the one through his arm and strode on.

The first flash of lightning came as they passed a row of incomplete frame houses, awaiting only roofs and interior finish to be offered the public as a proof of Medicine Hat's boom. Against the blackness of the sky their fresh timbers rose ghostlike and uninviting, but the only cover within four hundred yards.

Blindly in the sudden darkness they stumbled up the rude steps and through the space where would some time be a door. But the wail of the gale that followed brought home to them terrifyingly the illusion to which they had

thoughtlessly yielded. Here was not protection but added peril, loose boards rattling, rafters creaking, the very walls of the jerry-built structure bending to the storm. Suffering, howling ghosts surrounded them with menacing faces, and without a word the two sought the open, stumbling down the steps more recklessly than they had climbed them, and turning their faces westward toward the town.

Followed the dust storm.

As the grey cloud struck and enveloped them they reeled, staggered before it a moment, and with a spasmodic stiffening of muscles stood against it for their very lives. A stifled cry burst from Claire and she hugged tight against her protector. Archie had seen these storms before, though seldom, and never where they had such dust to feed them. Tightening his clasp on the girl at his side, he bent into the wind and pressed forward, laughing to reassure her, and twisting his body to take the brunt of the beating pressure from her cringing form. In a world of their own the pall gripped them. They were but as dust of the dust, and their mouths filled with the gasping dirt swept from miles of trail and dead grass and broken ground. They could not open their eyes, could not see the ground at their feet anyway. In a blind aimlessness more bewildering than darkness they plunged forward, the trained instinct of the born prairieman keeping him to the ruts of the trail.

His arm was about her now beneath her shoulders, half supporting her, holding her to the shelter of his body, and as he leaned forward his Stetson brim bent before his face and saved him from some of the stinging dust. Twice they fell, but he never loosed his hold, and quickly they were on their feet again. She was fighting now to ease the burden on him, and he felt it and acknowledged it with the pressure of his arm. At times they lay hard against the gale as into something solid, unable to advance, afraid to yield, and as the pressure eased they staggered to keep themselves upright.

She could not scream, though the terror of it was like a cutting knife as she snuggled into his coat and hid beneath his arm.

For hours they seemed to have fought forward, when he pulled up suddenly and swayed. One arm she threw out in a panic, fearful that he had overtaxed himself. But her grasp fell on something solid—the picket of a fence; and the fingers of his right hand closed over hers and for a minute they were content to stand, trying to recover their breath and ease the ache of their straining muscles.

Then slowly he led her along the fence. In a few moments he paused, shifted their direction, and she felt a slat walk beneath their feet. With a gasp of relief she heard him pound at a door and push it open, and she was dragged through into a peace that choked her with its suddenness. With arms down she staggered back against the wall and opened her eyes.

They were in a room lighted by a single dirty smelly lamp on a littered table. The whole room was horribly foul, two tables piled with unwashed dishes and particles of food, the floor unswept; and the air was thick with human breath and badly consumed oil. But worst of all was the trio of dusky faces that peered at them from beyond the table, two men and a woman. On the face of the older man was a suggestive leer that would have frightened her worse than the storm had it been turned on her. But the man was looking at Archie.

There was such a hideous intimacy about it, half fawning, half significant and privileged, that she turned to Archie with vague surprise. He stood as he had closed the door behind them, one arm still outstretched. And as she looked, the stare of startled discomfort in his distended eyes changed quickly to hot resentment and anger, a red flush showing through the dust on his cheeks.

As the man beyond the table slowly shifted his gaze to her, still smirking significantly, Archie reached out and dragged her to the door, and the next instant they

were out in the howling storm. And the worst of nature was a relief after that hateful leer and the evil-smelling room.

They reached the end of the slat walk and turned to the west along the fence. The dust was almost as bad as ever. She had no idea where they were, but they had at least something solid to hold to, and it strengthened her to go on. The fence came to a sudden end. For a moment they stood. There were signs now in the fitfulness of the wind that it was easing. Since they left the house neither had said a word, but she could feel Archie's body stiff with suppressed fury. She felt his face brush her ear.

"Stay here," he shouted. "Don't let go the fence. I'll be back."

He felt for her hand on the fence and pressed it tight, removed his coat and wrapped it about her head, and left her. She was too breathless to protest, too bewildered to realize what was happening. She clutched him as he turned away, but he threw her hand aside with a fierce movement that frightened her more than the idea of being left alone.

She did not know how long she stood clinging to the fence before a furious gust caught the coat and whipped it away, her hat with it. In an effort to save them she lost hold of the fence and could not find it again, and blind and directionless she staggered about. Then the rain gushed down, blotting out the dust as a child wipes off a slate. In the first clearness she saw the station and ran to it.

Julia and Maughan heard the story bit by bit, disconnected, spaced by broken memory and unruly impressions. Time had disappeared from the narrative, and even sequence of events; they patched it together for themselves as it tumbled from Claire's sobbing lips.

"Oh, Archie's all right," Julia declared with assurance. "He's an old-timer. He's probably up at Mrs. Cowle's, wondering where you are."

Maughan started from the room, but she read his purpose and brought him back with a look.

"He couldn't find you when you got away from the fence," Julia continued, "and he knew you wouldn't blow away. . . . Would you know the house you entered—some foreigner's, I suppose?"

"Oh, those hideous, sneering faces!" Claire shuddered. "And the choking odours and the filth!"

Julia was adjusting her clothes.

"I'll go and get your things," Maughan offered.

"No. It's dark now. We'll be home in ten minutes. . . . The Police will attend to this."

"The Police!" Claire gasped. "Do you mean—do you think——"

"Archie's of age," Julia said quietly. "If he doesn't find himself it's a case for the Mounted Police."

Maughan puzzled over that a great part of the night.

CHAPTER IX

THE FOUR-FLUSHER

ARCHIE WAMPOLE did not find himself. He had not been to Mrs. Cowle's, where Julia lived, and Maughan, by a round of the bars, found that he had not been seen there since the storm. Julia, confiding to no one, rang up several numbers on the telephone and rang off again. She even visited Caligni's barber shop, on the pretext of purchasing a certain face powder, and Caligni, suave and talkative, had no difficulty in persuading her to try a bottle of lotion warranted to counteract the worst sunburn. It was a matter for much discussion, and the occupants of the two chairs strained in vain to hear the conversation the simple purchase entailed.

In his round of the bars next day Maughan came on Texas in a somewhat disreputable drinking place on

South Railway Street. Tex greeted him with a sly wink and ordered drinks.

"Keepin' out of the way of Archie, eh?" he whispered. "So'm I. Just as well to let him cool off. He'll shore be sore."

"But why?" demanded Maughan irritably—perhaps a little guiltily.

Tex tilted the glass until the last drop gurgled into his insatiable throat, and placed it back on the counter.

"Well, he natu'ally thinks he's got the monopoly of bein' nice to them gals. But, cripes, he's a tenduhfoot at that game compa'ed with yoh. He's jealous as a young bull. Life out about the Double LF's shore goin' to be some excitin' till I can make him believe I wasn't backin' yoh. . . . 'Cause I ain't ce'tain I wasn't." He looked longingly at the empty glass. "Not yet I ain't. Anothuh glass or two might help."

Maughan touched his lips with a glossy linen handkerchief, an operation watched narrowly by several befuddled cowboys and disreputable citizens, and turned his back.

"Come outside, Tex. I want to talk, and I want you sober for it."

Tex followed to the sidewalk, his feet bracing indignantly against the fumes of the liquor.

"Have you seen Wampole since the game?" Maughan asked.

"Yoh bet I haven't. Yoh don't think I'm hangin' about this joint foh fun, do you? A fellow gets drunk too quick—ain't got half time to enjoy himself. Yoh take my advice and don't go out in daylight till Archie so't of fohgets."

"Do you think you could find him for me?"

Texas drew himself to a lurching uprightness and studied his companion's face with open eyes.

"Lookin' foh trouble, old hoss?"

"Trying to escape it, Tex, trying like hell. I've got to find Archie, and he seems to be misplaced. Miss Kingsley wants him."

In a few words he told the story. Texas listened with growing concern, and before the end was noticeably more sober.

"Wait a bit about heuh, yoh. I'm goin' on a little scoutin' expedition of my own. If he ain't in the baws I reckon I know where he is—or was last night."

He left Maughan standing on the street and hastened away, spurs clanking, the leather of his chaps scraping at every step. In five minutes he was back, clearly scared.

"Vamoosed!" he declared. Then after a moment's hesitation: "or wuss. He wasn't there last night. If he don't show up 'foh mo'nin' I'm shore goin' to spill it to the Police. Old Man Wampole'll so't of hold me responsible. I'm Archie's chum, and if anything happens the boy—His dad's a reglah tyrant. He's got an idea Archie ain't runnin' straight in town—and Old Man Wampole's death on that. Fellow'd think he nevuh was young himself. Archie's scared stiff of him. . . . and I'd soonuh tackle a grizzly with a wounded cub."

Archie Wampole was still missing when Texas called round next morning in search of Maughan, and, true to his threat and more than a little frightened, the cowboy carried the story to Inspector Barker. Maughan, relieved thus of any personal responsibility, tried to dismiss it from his mind.

"He didn't blow away," he scoffed to Texas.

"No-o. Just the same . . . I ain't foh losin' that kid yet awhile."

"Has he enemies?"

"Who? Archie Wampole? Archie's only enemies are his piles of friends, old hoss. Yoh can take it from me. Not an enemy in town . . . 'ceptin' yohself."

"Stop harping on that, Tex. I like the boy."

"Like pisen," grinned Texas.

"Fortunately I've the best of alibis—with his own fiancée."

For two days Maughan continued his rides over the prairie as if nothing had happened. On the third day Sergeant Prior pulled up beside him on the trail and peered into his face for a full half minute before speaking.

"Inspector wants to see you this afternoon."

"But I'm not going to be in till late."

"This afternoon," repeated the Sergeant crisply, and rode on.

Maughan continued away from town for fifty yards, then turned and rode back down the trail to Main Street. Two hours later, bathed, arrayed in clean shirt and rejuvenated tweeds, stick in hand, he strolled across the railway tracks and knocked on the door of the dingy barracks. A uniformed Policeman admitted him and immediately reached out to knock on the door to the right. A gruff voice within shouted to them to come, and Maughan found himself in the presence of the head of the local detachment.

The Inspector was apparently doing nothing more absorbing than staring through the dirty window into the street, one hand toying with a mussy tobacco pouch spilling over the blotter of the desk before him. At Maughan's entrance his keen eyes shifted and wandered frankly over the Englishman from head to foot. Then, with a wave of his hand, he directed the visitor to a chair.

"'Claude Maughan, London, England.' It doesn't tell us much about you, Maughan. . . . And I'm the very devil for wanting to know. Beyond those four words in the Provincial register you haven't been generous about yourself in pretty nearly three weeks. I can't find that you've spoken to a dozen, and"—his eyes twinkled—"there are many more than what want like blazes to know who the dickens you are and what you're doing here. This isn't an inquisitive country—it can't afford to be—but the Mounted Police are official hosts of the West, and naturally we want to know something about our guests." He grinned with a certain grim frankness. "And I can't afford to spend any more time trying to find out."

Maughan's face twisted into a smile, and the Inspector realized why he had taken so long to say what he would ordinarily have put in a dozen crisp words and a snap of the teeth.

"I wasn't surprised that you wished to see me," said Maughan. "I've been waiting for it. Your patience is worthy of more than I can tell you. I know the part the Mounted Police play in the big game of the Canadian West. Well. . . . I'm playing a hand myself."

The Inspector's grey eyes seemed to become pin points beneath his grizzled brows.

"My first card," Maughan went on, "is to ask who is Daniel Corfield."

The official eyes dropped to the blotter and the official hand picked up the pipe that lay there. Slowly and thoughtfully the tobacco was packed and the pipe thrust cold between tight lips. Then the Inspector spoke with infinite precision:

"It wasn't to answer your questions that I got you down here, Mr. Claude Maughan . . . though, in its place, I might do even that."

"Any objection to smoking, Inspector?"

Maughan struck a match and held it out to the Inspector who, after a perceptible hesitation, accepted it. After half a dozen whiffs the pipe was placed back on the desk.

"I'm on my way to giving you what you want to know, Inspector. Who is Daniel Corfield?"

The heavy brows met swiftly and parted.

"Dan Corfield"—picking his words carefully—"is a Western type—one type. I could tell you what he isn't better than what he is. Among a host of other parts he plays in this community is that of—well, he's one of our leading real estate dealers." His eyes darted quickly to Maughan's.

"I note the pause." Maughan tossed the match into the tray. "The answer you gave is the one that is least useful to me. I already knew that."

"In the West," broke in the Inspector sharply, "we don't mention all we note. You'll know that by the time our talk is over, if you're to get any information from me. Dan Corfield is vastly more than a real estate dealer. He's proprietor of one of our two undertaking establishments. He also owns a rather imposing ranch down on the Milk River, a car here in town, yells for the baseball team—which he backs, together with the Board of Trade and the Agricultural Society . . . inexpensively but vociferously. He's also local leader of one of our political parties . . . when it's shouting they want, y'understand. . . . Morally—I imagine that's where you're interested. . . . Well, he teaches the largest Bible Class in town. In fact, Dan Corfield has cornered most of the paying things in this burg."

Maughan smoked for a while in silence.

"You'll note, Inspector, that I'm learning my lesson of not talking too much. You've given me more than I could hope. Daniel Corfield seems to be a man of parts."

"Most Westerners are."

"And financially?"

"Corfield—financially? Hum! Better apply to Dun's—"

Maughan cut him short with a low laugh, carefully flicking the ash from his cigarette.

"But the financial interests of one with only ten days' expenses in his pocket are not worth your time."

The Inspector's eyebrows fluttered up and down.

"Let's have the story," he demanded.

Maughan drew a fresh cigarette and held it up, smiling sadly at it.

"Mustn't, Claude. You've already exhausted your ration for the day." He turned to the Inspector. "They smoke well, too, when one can't afford to indulge oneself."

The Inspector pulled open a drawer and tossed on the desk before his visitor a tin box of cigarettes.

"Smoke mine."

"Thank you, no. I'm gradually breaking myself in to the scale of a mendicant. One package a day for

last week—and for this. It's been hard—and it doesn't seem to be getting easier. But I'll hang on—with your consent. Anyway, it's the story you want. . . . Last summer Daniel Corfield visited England, his luggage consisting of unlimited propositions, the usual amount of assurance, and an inexhaustible store of talk. He engaged a suite at the Savoy and a small boy in buttons to keep the queue in line. *The Times* mentioned him glowingly only four times—in its Personal Column—and that was three times more than was necessary, I believe. An uncle of mine read *The Times* the first day and was so far back in the queue he didn't see Corfield for a week. . . . And now Uncle Ambrose is dead . . . and I'm his heir."

The lines at the sides of the Inspector's nose were twitching.

"And you're sorry he lived the week out, eh? Which of Dan's propositions did your Uncle Ambrose bite on?"

"The Garrison Subdivision. I own the whole subdivision—one hundred and sixty acres, with a third yet to pay."

The Inspector threw up his hands. "I can, at least, think of you hereafter as one of our landed gentry—one that Corfield landed on that trip. The truth is, the Garrison Subdivision——"

"I've been making daily pilgrimages to it for more than two weeks; I know its last cactus plant and tumble weed."

"I hope you know its first virtue."

"I don't. I was hoping I'd find one in Corfield. I'm looking for a reason to pay that last third. But I seem to be the owner of a thousand gophers and several score of flowering cactus plants. Apart from that every living germ seems to have avoided it."

"With only ten days' board on me," advised the Inspector, "I'd give it up and take to something with a ray of hope. The June rains are over. We're in the middle of the dry season . . . and this, you know, is the semi-arid belt."

"It looks," mused Maughan, with a sigh, "as if Corfield will never get that other third . . . if that's any good to me—which it isn't."

"But if you've only ten days' keep on you——"

"I'd take to work, if the legacy were worth holding."

"And my guess is that that would be a new adventure for you. Am I right?"

"Everything I experience about you Mounted Police convinces me that your efficiency has not been exaggerated."

"Thanks!" grunted the Inspector. "I'm not blind. . . . Of course, if Corfield misrepresented things about the subdivision——"

"Let's see: 'Within three miles of the centre of the city?'"

"If Dan Corfield never told a bigger lie than that he wouldn't need to teach a Bible Class. In a business sense the city hall corner up there is the centre of the city, though the southern edge of this town of eight thousand is within five hundred yards of that. It places your land two miles and three-quarters outside the town—by simple subtraction."

Maughan had been holding a finger of his right hand on the thumb of his left. He moved it on to the first finger.

"Recommendation number two: 'A bed of coal underlying the property.' He had samples of it. Uncle had visions, I believe, of becoming a mineowner, like Thomas and Northumberland."

"Once more within the law. Anyone can see the seams of coal along the river bank. But Medicine Hat coal is commercially impossible—too soft to burn locally and not worth the expense of shipping. Next?"

"'A large river within a few hundred yards of the property.'"

The Inspector groaned.

"It's honest-to-goodness truth. He probably neglected to add that the South Saskatchewan is eighty feet lower

and unnavigable. Of course, if you wish to install an irrigation system for a quarter section——”

“Not out of my ten days’ allowance.”

“I feared it might not appeal to you. Now, how much did your Uncle Ambrose pay to stand for a week in that queue?”

“Thirty pounds an acre.”

“One hundred and fifty dollars! Phew! Well, considering the way your countrymen have been nibbling at the bait of every Canadian real estate shark without taking the trouble to investigate, I consider Corfield let you down easy. Of course, you could buy up the whole plateau now for twenty or less and all the drink you could swallow with each transaction. And you couldn’t *give* the Garrison away locally. I suppose you thought you’d farm it first, and then turn it into town lots? It’ll never be farmed this side of another flood. Dry? Say, that plateau doesn’t give a cactus a fighting chance.”

Maughan shrugged his shoulders and absent-mindedly helped himself to one of the Inspector’s cigarettes.

“Looks as if I’ve got to remain the owner of that patch of sand or pay up the other third for the chap I give it to. Am I right?”

“Right? Why, you couldn’t wish it off on the authorities for the taxes. They’d rather have the pin in that tie you’re wearing than your hundred and sixty acres.”

Maughan grinned.

“You can still laugh, I see,” growled the Inspector. “Well, let me tell you that others have been laughing at you for two weeks and a half.”

“And wondering,” added Maughan, watching the ash fall in the tray from a delicately manipulated cigarette. “Including the Mounted Police.”

“At least no one wonders about your origin. It sticks out on you like the horns of a Texas steer. All you need is a monocle and a pair of spats——”

“Within two months I’ve worn both. Have them now in a suitcase at the hotel.”

"For God's sake, leave 'em there. The Police have enough to do these days without coddling a tenderfoot. A cockney accent, a frank neglect of aspirates I can stand——"

"Hif a haccent is any 'elp," said Maughan, "stryke me blind, mate, but I might tyke a chance on that. I aren't 'arf a cockney, back 'ome."

He sniffled, drew the back of his hand across his nose, and hitched his trousers in the accepted style of the cockney.

"You see, my father was a miner and Uncle Ambrose was nothing more reputable than a greengrocer, so far as anyone knew. Yes, Mr. Inspector, I'm what a Canadian would call a four-flusher. If dad left more than his bill at the Pig and Whistle when he died, and a steady record of misplaced h's, I never heard of it. Uncle left me the Garrison Subdivision. Dad's bill was the least expensive to me."

"If I were you, my dear fellow, I'd make straight for the East, where they don't pay so much attention to freaks."

"My assets wouldn't carry me as far as Winnipeg."

"We might arrange about the transportation."

Maughan tossed away the end of the cigarette and rose, adjusting his knickers.

"Claude Ambrose always pays his way. I'm going to stay. I've a mind to make good on the subdivision."

"It takes more than a mind," warned the Inspector grimly. "And I don't want any more loafing Englishmen about."

"I don't need to loaf for ten days, Inspector. Give me that time."

"And then arrest you as a vagrant? All right. In the meantime I'll give you some advice free. Drop the English of it. Spend your last cent on an outfit and go to work. In other words, be Western."

Maughan's eye drooped as if he were considering a wink.

"Advice is the one thing that's free in this country—

and it's what a chap like me needs most. For two and a half weeks in a new country I don't consider that I've made bad progress. A prairie fire—a dust storm—some wonderful friends—an enemy or two—and an inveigling mystery. I'm going to hang about and see it through—for I intend to pocket that five thousand dollars' reward Old Man Wampole is offering for the return of his son. . . . Good-bye, Inspector. Fine cigarettes, those, when one's ration is gone. After ten days we may meet again."

CHAPTER X

THE POSITION OF THINGS

MAUGHAN, retracing his steps thoughtfully across the railway tracks, strode with a new vigour, and a slow smile spread over his face. At the corner of Main and South Railway Street Sergeant Prior nodded to him, and Maughan closed one eye and grinned. Then, disgusted with himself, he passed hurriedly up Main Street toward the city hall.

Prior watched the retreating figure of the Englishman with a quizzical frown. "Wonder how much he told the Inspector—and what he got in return," he muttered.

Far up Main Street Maughan was taking himself to task:

"Claude Ambrose, you giddy ass, you're riding for a bad fall in this Western country."

The Sergeant made for the barracks. As he passed through the hall his superior called to him:

"You met that Englishman, Prior. What sort of a look did he have on his face?"

"Like the bird that ate the canary, sir."

"M—m! . . . Either Mister Claude Ambrose Maughan, London, England, is a prince of liars . . . or he's not safe to let run loose in an unsophisticated country like this." He frowned at the tobacco strewn blotter. "Come in, Sergeant, and close the door."

At the corner of Main Street and Fourth Avenue, with the new city hall diagonally across from him, Maughan knew that he stood in the nominal centre of the town. He pulled up and looked about him. Beside him was a newspaper office, and the racket of the big press was a cheery sound in his ears. Ahead, on the next corner, was the only club Medicine Hat could boast, a converted brick residence—not too much converted to fulfil its purpose with fluent adequacy—and across Main Street the fourth corner was unbuilt, held at a price, Maughan knew, as high as a downtown Yonge Street corner in Toronto.

The Garrison Subdivision was three miles further on, up over the rise at the end of Main Street, two and three-quarter miles of it bald prairie and likely to remain so in his time. On his right, only a hundred yards away, the South Saskatchewan made a thousand-foot gap the town could not leap until the proposed bridge was built. Back of him the railway track put an effective limit to business extension in that direction, though the flat beyond was well built over and a few local stores were opening. On his left the town laboured up the face of a diagonal cutbank.

Maughan recalled the sixteen thousand dollars that might have been his, now dropped into the bottomless well that went by the name of the Garrison Subdivision, and he faced about down Main Street and fixed his eyes malevolently on a great projecting sign that swung above a single-story metal-sided shack in the line of the stores. In large white letters he read: "Corfield the Cordial. See Him First." His fists clenched, and he gave a hitch to his shoulders that constituted a threat.

Footsteps approached quietly along Fourth Avenue and stopped behind him.

"Wondering where to buy?" inquired a teasing voice.

He started nervously and faced the speaker, raising his cap. The friendly smile illuminated his cadaverous face.

"Wondering where to *die*—cheapest, Miss Kingsley."

"But nobody dies in Medicine Hat."

"Few would want to."

"You're prejudiced, Mr. Maughan. You'll grow as fond of the town as the rest of us. I meant that people come here to live, not to die."

"Nor to *let* live."

She studied him with sudden seriousness.

"I hope you haven't been—biting?"

He spread out his hands helplessly. "I guess I'm the easiest fish ever came to this town. I've swallowed bait and hook—and even the sinker, I'm beginning to feel."

She was very sober, standing there with her dark eyes lifted anxiously to his. He tried to smile her gravity away. But she seemed to be looking so much deeper than his face, her heavy lids partially concealing the dark iris. For a moment they continued that way. Then:

"I want to talk to someone, Miss Kingsley. I'm such a stranger——"

"If you'll take my advice you'll get out of town before you can't."

"There are many reasons why I must turn down your advice. I'll tell you one: I like the place—I like the people. I want to know more of them. In pursuit of that purpose I'm going to call on you this evening. Don't forget," he reminded her hastily, "I saved your life."

But she shook her head firmly.

"Mr. Maughan, you don't understand Medicine Hat. It's only a cow-town, where to-day's papers arrive tomorrow—if the train's on time—where there's not a book to read outside the bookstores, where the price of that vacant lot across the street is of more importance than the story of Salvation and the logic of living. We deal daily in hundreds of thousands—on paper . . . and discuss for a week Dan Corfield's burst tire. We talk of a population of a hundred thousand in ten years . . . and tear to pieces each of the extra ninety thousand as he arrives. Over there"—she nodded her head slightly toward the

club—"a score of business men who leave clerks to run their businesses are watching us through the windows and putting words in our mouths we will never think of . . . and to-night the whole town will be discussing us in the same breath."

He lifted a threatening look to the club windows.

"Damn the gossips! Oh, so sorry!"

"Please don't apologize. I've been using the feminine equivalent for days."

"Is it only days since you felt the gossip?" he asked, suddenly interested.

But she was looking away from him and made no answer. He stepped to her side.

"At least I can walk with you where you're going?"

"You may walk with me as far as the city hall; then—well, I'm a High School teacher and have a reputation to maintain. You're on your way to the city hall—you can leave me and drop in there."

His jaws closed firmly. "I had a lot to tell you. But in twenty yards I refuse even to start."

"Then," she said heartlessly, "I'm doomed to go without it . . . or wait," she added, with a kindly afterthought.

They were crossing the corner, his long, free stride beyond curtailment to the proportions of her short steps. Without raising her face she spoke rapidly:

"In the moment we have, Mr. Maughan, I must speak. I—I only want to point out that I'm—I'm in a sort of mourning for Archie Wampole."

He made a movement of impatience, but she cut him short with flashing eyes.

"I really am. Archie has disappeared. There is talk of—of foul play. Under the circumstances——"

"I understand," he said coldly; and lifting his cap he turned to leave.

She reached out to him impulsively.

"Archie is gone, Mr. Maughan. Nothing—nothing can make me forget that."

His eyes fell on her left hand. On the third finger sparkled once more the diamond that had been there once and had disappeared.

CHAPTER XI

SIXTY CENTS

MORE than a week later, in the early afternoon, Maughan strolled up the Esplanade. On his left extended the homes of Medicine Hat's Four Hundred, the winter residences of ranchers from eighty miles of ranges. A motley array the houses were, planned by careless contractors for careless owners. Each stood in the centre of its own bare lot, each fronted by a picket fence, each loudly giving thanks that it was not as its neighbours were. Maughan, musing on the character of their owners, contemplated them with frank interest.

Across the street only a narrow strip of unbuilt ground separated the Esplanade from the South Saskatchewan. Beyond the wide river a narrow valley to the surrounding cutbank, down which the railway ran, and then open prairie. Maughan found the open spaces more lovely to look upon. For minutes he stood staring into the face of the cutbank, picturing what lay beyond, up along the twisting course of the unruly river that whirled with the eddies of its ceaseless current.

As he shifted to the south he was aware of a woman seated on the balcony of one of the houses, crouched over the railing, her eyes fixed on the distant west. With a start he recognized Julia Kingsley, and, motionless, he watched, his hands opening and closing. Her chin rested on her two hands, and a glint of moisture showed beneath either eye. She was utterly unconscious of the watcher below, but as the moisture gathered to a teardrop and trickled down her cheeks, he coughed and moved briskly along.

From the corner of his eye he saw her start back behind the railing.

"Oh, Miss Kingsley!" he called.

She showed her eyes above the railing, nothing more.

"I'm coming in," he announced, and pushed open the gate.

She admitted him herself, her face revealing nothing of the misery he had surprised there, save a heaviness of the straight-edged upper lids. He followed her upstairs, neither speaking after the initial greeting.

In the sitting room Claire rose with a partly completed garment in her hand and welcomed him eagerly. Obviously she had found her sister's society depressing that afternoon.

"I thought perhaps you'd left town," she said, lifting her glance coyly to his.

"Your sister knew I was here to stay."

"My sister doesn't confide in me. You might at least have inquired about our health after the storm," she pouted.

"I've seen your sister," he returned a little brutally, adding hastily: "I haven't forgotten. I couldn't come before." He regarded Julia for a moment. "I'm not sure I should have come now."

Julia broke in on them:

"I thought you were to discard that outing suit and try to look like a Westerner. It was agreed, wasn't it?"

"It was suggested. Fact is, I'm more attached to the dear old thing than ever—it's made me such charming friends."

"Oh, Mr. Maughan!" gurgled Claire, dropping her lashes.

Maughan blinked and plucked his under lip.

The noise of the front door closing came up to them. Julie turned to her sister.

"That's Mrs. Cowle, Claire. You'll be able to use the machine."

Claire, with a little moue of understanding, gathered up her work and left the room. Julie walked to the balcony door and stood inside the screen.

"You didn't take my advice and leave town," she remarked.

"No. I told you I was staying."

She was standing where he could see her profile; her fingers were interlaced behind her back.

"The other day you said there were three reasons why you wouldn't take my advice. You told me only one."

"I can give you one other now. The third—some day—perhaps. May I smoke, Miss Kingsley? I find it easier to talk—about certain things when I've a cigarette between my lips. The second reason why I won't leave is that I haven't enough to buy a ticket . . . and the walking in the West is bad, I believe, and so very long between stops."

She swung round on him full-face, her eyes wide open. Then she smiled incredulously.

"I assure you that I'm not trying to startle or amuse you," he said gravely, "but just to tell you—something about myself I—think you ought to know."

She bowed without speaking.

"And now," he said briskly, "what's been happening to you since I saw you nine days ago?"

She frowned the question aside.

"You're stopping at the Provincial—you must have money for that."

"Does it matter? I might not be paying my bills. As a matter of fact I am—I always do. I'm deceiving no one deliberately—no one that matters. I would have money—lots of it—if Medicine Hat hadn't let me down. I wouldn't have told you, but—but—— Perhaps you understand, Miss Kingsley."

She nodded. There was no affectation about it, no spurious curiosity and denial. Once more she turned to the open door and looked away through the screen. Maughan smoked as he watched her.

"I've met a lot who were—out of funds," she said in a low voice. "As a rule they don't interest me. So many are temporarily poor here, and millionaires next day."

"I haven't a chance of becoming a millionaire," he assured her. "There isn't a ray of light beyond what faces any man with a pair of hands and willingness to use them. But I've never worked—much."

"I knew that. Perhaps that's why your case interests me. I'm sensitive to the difficulties that face you in Medicine Hat—the friend that saved my life."

"Perhaps it might help a little if I told you that it's not the first time I've been up against it financially."

He snuffed out the end of the cigarette, drew another from a gold cigarette case and smelled it hungrily, returning it with the single companion that remained there. She was watching him when he looked up.

"I'm rationing myself," he smiled. "I have to."

She returned to her chair and sank back in it, contemplating him with her fixed, probing stare.

"And now, tell me frankly just how near to rock bottom you are."

"It's good of you to appear to care, Miss Kingsley. I don't owe a penny. To-morrow the slate will be wiped clean—clean on both sides. Not so bad, is it? Well, there'll be something like sixty cents to the good. Nothing to go to jail about, is it?"

"But you have plans? Oh no—I don't believe you would have—not serious ones."

"I'm developing an idea. It may lead nowhere. But, though I intended to let you know, that was not why I came. I saw you out there on the porch. It's not good for you to think and think and think."

Her lips closed tightly. "But what else can I do? I always have loved that view over the river and the railway and the cutbank."

"Then I should say that you have never been really happy——"

"And it seems to fit in with my feelings." She did not seem to be aware he was speaking.

"With how you *want* to feel," he corrected, "with how you think you ought to feel." He saw her start and flush angrily, but he went on: "You're fretting, Miss Kingsley, and it doesn't do a bit of good to you or Archie Wampole."

"Wouldn't you fret in my place?"

He cleared his throat and spoke with a clear firmness unlike his customary manner with her:

"Now that Archie Wampole is gone you think of him—differently."

She came to her feet with flashing anger, as if she had been touched on a raw spot.

"Stop! You shall not say that—you have no right to. You—a stranger!"

He bowed to the storm, but did not quail.

"Miss Kingsley, will you believe me when I say that I'm not unsympathetic? I pity you—pity you for several reasons. They've left you to find him alone. No one is helping you. I know it. Even the Police——"

"The Police are doing nothing. They don't seem to be bothering. I don't know why." Tears were welling down her cheeks.

"The Mounted Police never do say why, do they?"

"They should. Of course they may be working quietly. I don't know a clue they have."

"Have *you* a clue?" He was looking straight at her and she turned quickly to the door.

"No."

"You suspect nothing that could have happened to him?"

"I do not."

She was facing him now with unflinching eyes. He came and stood beside her.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Maughan," she cried hastily, "I'd rather you didn't show yourself at that door. There'll be talk as it is."

"I merely wished to see if the Police were still outside," he replied languidly.

"The Police? What do you mean?"

She was plainly concerned, startled. He smiled down on her.

"It's me they're after, Miss Kingsley. I'm an interesting specimen to them; they can't leave me alone." She leaned forward to peer through the screen to the street below. A red-coated constable was sauntering about at the corner above.

"Mr. Maughan," she said suddenly, close to his shoulder, "you made a strange remark just now—about me and—and Archie. What did you mean exactly?"

"Would it relieve me of answering if I told you that I'm going to find Archie Wampole?"

A curious expression flitted into those wonderful eyes of hers and was gone.

"Really, Mr. Maughan, I don't see why you should. How can it interest you?"

"Well," he said, rubbing his chin, "one of my plans for getting out of a financial hole is to earn that five thousand dollars of Old Man Wampole's."

He picked up his cap and left her without another word. And out on the street the red-coated Policeman dropped casually in behind him and strolled down the Esplanade.

The proprietor of the Provincial greeted him with beckoning finger. Maughan approached the curved counter in the corner and waited.

"Ah—Mr. Maughan, I was wondering if you intend to stay—to become a regular boarder. If you are I'll find you a seat at the boarders' table. I'm afraid, too, I'll have to give you another room. The travellers are kicking, and the tourist traffic is so exacting. Ah—I've been breaking one of the house rules in your case. We always collect in advance from our boarders. Not that I don't trust you——"

Maughan made a lazy movement toward his pocket and drew out a small roll of bills from which he extracted several and laid them on the counter.

"I think you'll find that settles up to to-morrow night, the end of my week. I'm leaving then. You've done well by me, Mr. Wright. If ever I'm this way again——"

"We'll always be glad to see you, Mr. Maughan. Going West?"

"No," Maughan replied over his shoulder.

He descended the fourteen steps to the sidewalk and turned along South Railway Street and again south over the railway tracks to the livery stable where he hired his horse.

"Let's see," he said carelessly to the proprietor, "my week's up on Saturday, isn't it? I'll pay you now. Not sure I'll be needing the horse after that. Fine beast, too. Never rode a better."

Out in the street he drew from his pocket a few pieces of silver and counted them over.

"Right to a cent. Sixty cents. And I've a whole day to loaf . . . then it's work for Claude Ambrose."

Behind the dirty barracks window Inspector Barker's keen eyes looked out. He saw the thin lips round in a whistle, the long legs stride out briskly across the tracks; and his strong hand went up reflectively to the pointed moustache.

CHAPTER XII

CORFIELD THE CORDIAL

UP Main Street Maughan continued his way. Presently he came beneath the great sign before the single-story shack that advised the world in large white lettering to See Corfield the Cordial First. Maughan had delayed to the last moment following the advice, but now he pushed through the plate-glass door with no uncertain manner.

He found himself in a small square of which the other three sides were mahogany-stained counter. In the large outer office beyond, a stenographer was engaged, at the

moment of his entrance, in nothing more exacting than a yawn into a ring-filled hand. A tousle-headed young man in eye-glasses was seated before a desk, one leg lifted across the corner, reading a paper-backed novel.

As the door closed, bustle descended upon the pair as if it had blown in from the street. The stretching jaws closed almost with a snap as the girl picked up a notebook and anxiously, turned over its pages; the young man concentrated on a pile of printed agreements. Maughan leaned on the counter, waiting patiently, his back to the urgency he had introduced, and occupied himself with trying to decipher the window signs from the inside.

One entire window was covered with enamel lettering which he spelled into "Come to Corfield the Cordial for Country and Town Properties." The other had a series of admonitions, from which he laboriously selected "Corfield Calculates Correctly," and "Corfield Carries the Choicest." Finally his eyes rested with relief on a simple, unalliterative sentence on the glass of the door: "Corfield Knows. Ask Him." And there he let them remain. They startled his uneducated sense of advertisement less than the more thoughtfully worded style Corfield seemed to favour.

The eye-glassed young man tore himself from the pile of agreements and dashed to the counter.

"Wha' c'n do f' y'u?"

"May I see Corfield the Cordial—as it says there?" Maughan asked innocently, pointing to the windows.

The girl tittered and the young man ran his fingers uncertainly through his rumpled hair. Maughan had his eyes fixed on one of two doors at the back of the outer office, the one marked "Private." Through the ground glass he could make out the dim outline of someone beyond.

"What name?"

"Oh, every one knows me," Maughan smiled vacuously. "Just tell him a stranger wants to see him about some real estate."

The clerk retired to the rear, edged himself through the

door at which Maughan was looking, and closed it tightly behind him. He did not reappear for fully two minutes, and Maughan had time to run his eyes over the blue-prints on the walls until he came to one in the back corner that looked suspiciously like the Garrison Subdivision, his own white elephant.

At last the door at the back edged open and the clerk slid out. A moment later the door was thrown back wide and out gushed Corfield himself, a tornado of a man, sweeping across the office with extended hands, smiling, boisterous, welcoming—Corfield the Cordial to a dot.

The unresponsive face of the stranger behind the mahogany-stained counter slowed his pace a little before it had carried him far, and the smile stiffened to a mechanical flex of the features. But Corfield the Cordial knew only one approach, and he went on with it like a man. Still he did not raise the flap of the counter immediately, contenting himself with extending his great hand across it and enfolding Maughan's in the grip of a bear.

"Seen you about for a week or two, Mr. Maughan. Wondering when you'd drop round. They all come through that door sooner or later, most of them sooner than you. Corfield the Cordial can afford to bide his time. Nothing like getting familiar with Medicine Hat for filling a brainy man with its limitless opportunities and boundless possibilities. And the longer you put it off the fuller you get. Eh? And that means dropping in on Corfield the Cordial to talk things over. Yes, always.

"You English—I always say it takes the English to pick a winner for their money. You've had lots of practice putting your pounds on the ponies. Say, not bad that—'practice putting pounds on ponies'—but no use to me for an advertisement, is it? Oh, yes, I know the English. Spent a whole summer over there. When it comes to doing things up quick and generously, and yet with real brain-power, give me the English. And this is the town where doing things generously pays quicker than anywhere else on God's earth. This is the West, man, the West, the hub

of the swiftest moving wheel the universe ever saw. The English are my best customers—they've the ready cash and the sense to use it, and when you put the cash in the hands of a reputable agent like yours truly——" He laughed and rubbed his hands. "None of your diddling little deals where an Englishman's at one end of it, and when he and I are working in team harness there's a fortune on the way to the credit of the Bank of England and another satisfied client to add to a list that's already run over the edges of Corfield the Cordial's register. Now you—you want something recommended by your own common sense and my experience. I've got it. Look about you." He waved his hand about the print-lined walls. "That's only a fraction of the good things I handle—and you could put your money on any piece of it and sit back and watch it grow. Much of it's too good to offer loose to the undiscerning public. That, for instance. But you——"

Still he did not raise the counter flap.

"I was interested in something like that, yes," Maughan admitted modestly. "I thought maybe you could help me."

Up went the flap with a bang, and Corfield's fat hand settled affectionately on Maughan's arm and dragged him through.

"Come in! Come in! Help you? Gosh, I'm here to do everything about it but pocket the shekels at the end. Anything from a shack lot in the flats to that corner of opulent opportunity—my own description—across there opposite the city hall. Two hundred dollars down—or twenty thousand. That's me. Or if you have an idea of tickling the soil with a sulky plough—and it's all you need about here—you'll reap the grandest and easiest crops since Eden from what I can show you. Or a ranch—twenty thousand acres at a scoop, with such a fortune every fall to salt away that the banks have to run a special train to carry the coin. Anything—anything—I have it."

They passed into the back office, Corfield's hand still clinging to Maughan's arm. A real mahogany chair was thrust into the back of Maughan's knees and he dropped

into it with a swift conviction that, whatever else remained to be discovered, Corfield knew a comfortable chair and its value in a business deal. A chap could sign away his fortune there without a groan.

"A ranch now? Rancher myself. Know the ropes from A to Z. And between you and me, that's the game for a capable fellow like you. Got a tidy corner of the prairie to myself down Milk River way—the Circle D—not a bad proposition I always think when my bank book's checked up at Christmas. Keeps me in cigars, at least. Have one." He pushed across a gaily coloured box. "You'll find them O.K. Makes me think I must know a bit about cattle and horses, but, gosh! I'm as green as a baby about them, really. Fellow with brains don't need to know a thing about them; the prairie does it while you count the seasons. Yes, I know these parts. Ought to—I'm secretary of the Board of Trade, pay up my little spondulics to keep alive the best baseball team that ever straddled a home plate, and find time now and then to help the farmers out in the Agricultural Society. Going some, eh? I should say I can help you. And when you get tired counting your money and the time comes to cash in, why, I can bury you. Yes, and b'gosh, I can say a decent prayer over the grave, for I've got the livest Bible Class in Canada. Glad to see you out any Sunday to hear me spiel some inside information on the mansions in the sky."

He stopped to boom his boisterous laugh through the room.

Maughan was looking confused—he felt confused. He seized the moment to stammer his immediate interest in a ranch—for a friend; he himself might like to look at some promising town lots when the ranch business was off his mind.

"Any special district?" asked Corfield, his exuberance slightly dampened. "Ranches are hard to find as chicken's teeth—they pay too darn well—nobody with a ranch needs to sell or wants to. . . . Takes a bit of coin, too, to float a ranch—twenty thousand or so in cash."

He was watching the effect on Maughan. Not a ripple of alarm showed in the lean face of the Englishman.

"I thought perhaps the Cypress Hills district," Maughan suggested vaguely. "Looks good to me as I ride about out there."

Corfield consulted a list he took from a drawer, frowning at it.

"Anyway, you've got an eye. That's the cream of the lot. Of course, the land is cornered long ago by old-established ranches."

"I was wondering if any of them would sell. Take, for instance, the one where that young man lived who disappeared. They say his father's an old man. After this—this calamity he might like to get away."

Though he talked in the rambling manner of one with no definite plan, he kept his eyes fixed on Corfield's face. The real estate man noted it, read his own meaning into it, and winked.

"Now you're talking. The Double LF has most of them beat a mile. If Archie hadn't—— Come to think of it, Old Man Wampole might consider a proposition if I had one to offer. I don't mind telling you on the q.t.—of course, you won't say a word—that I don't believe Archie Wampole will ever turn up."

Maughan blinked his interest.

"Then perhaps there's a chance. If you're sure enough he won't turn up, to go into this thing in earnest, say, as a partner, I wouldn't mind getting a bank account transferred here right away so we could take it up as soon as you can put the deal through. If you're satisfied the young man won't—that he's dead."

Corfield had risen and was standing before a safe in the corner. He turned about and eyed Maughan.

"I didn't say dead. But Archie Wampole's not going to show up about these parts again. Never mind why. How I know"—he stooped to the safe, gave the knob a few careful turns, pulled the heavy door open, and from an inner drawer extracted a bundle of small slips of paper.

"Archie Wampole owes me too much money to come back. Those are I.O.U.'s of his. Lots of people find it cheaper to flit than face the music."

"You mean he's—he's run away?"

"Pulled out for California or Florida. . . . His father finds it cheaper to offer that five thousand reward than get Archie back and pay his debts. Of course, that's strictly a business confidence, you understand? Nobody knows I hold those notes—except Archie, of course . . . and probably the old man. But they're going to have a place all to themselves in that safe of mine to make sure that Archie doesn't find it profitable to come home. I'm no fonder of losing money than the next one."

"But how did he come to owe——? Did he go too deep in real estate with you?"

Corfield looked away. "I didn't say it was real estate. He owes the money—as you can see from his name to every one of those slips. If you're really interested in the Double LF I'll pump the old man one of these days and see what the prospects are."

For several minutes they discussed the probable amount of cash required, the number of cattle and horses, and the year's prices for stock. But Corfield brought the subject round to things of more immediate and certain profit.

"And now, what about those town lots? They're the get-rich-quick propositions out here, and don't require a lot of money to float them. I'll quote you rock-bottom prices of special stuff that I don't offer everyone, and sacrifice some of my commission for a friend. Here, for instance——"

Maughan's eyes had been ranging the walls.

"Nice looking lay-out to that piece," he observed, pointing to a blue-print near the window. "The care with which you people here lay out your town property—square blocks, wide streets, reasonably sized lots, central parks, schools already marked, and every street named before a house is built." He leaned forward to decipher the name printed at the bottom. "'Garrison Subdivision.'"

"Oh, that's all sold—last summer. Fellow in London bought it—the whole piece. Insisted on having it all. It's not in the market, that I know of. But it's nothing compared with a bunch of stuff——"

Maughan sank back in his chair.

"I'm sorry for that," he drawled. "I own the Garrison Subdivision."

Corfield's jaw dropped and his usual come-on face lost some of its cordiality.

"You bought it? I sold it to a man named Vincent."

"Ambrose Vincent—my mother's brother. He left it to me. It was all he had to leave." Maughan leaned across the table and held Corfield's fluttering eyes. "Did you rob him? Forty-eight hundred pounds, thirty-two hundred paid, is a lot to lose——"

The good-fellow smile returned to Corfield's face. He leaped to his feet and clapped Maughan boisterously on the shoulder, while his left hand gripped the other's arm.

"Lose? Corfield's clients can't collapse. By the horn spoon, I should put that on the window. Lose? Man alive, it's not thirty-two hundred gone, but thirty-two thousand and more made. *That's* what the Garrison Subdivision means to the fellow who's lucky enough to own it two or three years from now. If you knew what I know——"

"Will you take it back and return Uncle Ambrose's money?"

"But we real estate men can't——"

"Will you?"

"By jove, Maughan, you tempt me. I only wish I had the ready cash to grab your offer before you leave this office. The owner of one hundred and sixty acres within three miles of the centre of the growing town of Medicine Hat. . . . Just—in—that—spot, is going to bless the day he heard of Corfield the Cordial. If I had that land I'd be smoking dollar cigars in less than three years, not those twenty-cent gaspers that are all I can afford till I

learn sense enough to leave my money in the bank instead of sinking it in more real estate as fast as I make it."

Maughan looked interested.

"What's the future of the Garrison Subdivision that makes you so confident?"

Corfield glanced fearfully about the empty room and hitched his chair nearer.

"Maughan, my dear friend, you're a potential millionaire. I could tell you something . . . but I shouldn't. . . . Still, I like you. . . . I believe I can trust you. I've the best of inside information that the Canadian Pacific Railway is preparing plans to run a high-level bridge across the river and valley from the top of the cutbank toward Calgary where the line starts down the grade to the bridge. This town is a rotten situation from a railway point of view. They intend to cut straight across on the level—right through your property—and come out at Dunmore Junction without taking this drop into town. It'll save them two or three miles of railway, an hour's time, a pusher engine, and incalculable wear and tear. Fact is, they should have done it years ago. They're at it in earnest at last. See where it'll land you?"

Maughan's hand fondled the sixty cents in his pocket, and for a moment he wondered if he could run a month's bill at the Provincial. Corfield talked well, but it was the fire with which he talked that enthused his clients.

"Then what will happen?" went on the Cordial one, rising excitedly. "Why this big city will pick itself up bodily and beg to find a place on the Garrison, where the station's sure to be. Your uncle paid me a hundred and fifty dollars an acre; his heir can sell *every* foot of that land for that price. That's what's ahead of you, you blooming millionaire. Jumpin' Jupiter, I wish I had your chance. And all I ask—I, the simple, honest fellow who put you in the way of it for only a trifling commission—all I ask is that you remember in the day of your opulence Corfield the Cordial, Corfield the Correct Calculator, Corfield who cops the cotton for his clients—that you

remember him and take him to the club for a drink, one solitary drink—I don't take more at a time—and I don't mind if it's at my expense. And don't you forget that I'm tickled to death that it's you, not some stiff who'd come in here to the day the last check is paid growling and grouching that I'd done him, and try to give Medicine Hat a black eye. You? You got vision—brains—fairness and common sense. Knew it the instant I saw you at the station the day you landed in town. Here's my hand. Good luck to you. Now I got a lot of agreements to sign. . . .”

Maughan stumbled into the street, blinking. He ran his hand blankly across his moist forehead and stared away up Main Street to the edge of the town that lay two and three-quarter miles from his property. The brisk prairie air swept down the street and cleared his brain.

“Corfield, you cordial liar!” he growled. “I'm learning to dislike you.”

He sauntered down to the hotel. He had still a day of solvency. But after to-morrow—what?

CHAPTER XIII

THE SHOTS AT ELK LAKE

IN the rotunda of the Provincial he sat down, put his handkerchief behind his head, and leaned back against the leather upholstery. Apparently he had not a care in the world, and the proprietor glanced at him from behind the counter with a thought that perhaps he had been hasty in suggesting the strict enforcement of rules in the case of one with so much luxurious leisure.

The shrill cry of newsboys rose from the street and in a moment two of them fought their way through the door with the *Medicine Hat News*, one of the two weekly newspapers. Every man in the room reached for his pocket and expended five cents on the still wet issue,

neglecting all else for the moment in the weekly habit of searching for something of real interest in the local papers. Maughan noted the general movement and felt the sixty cents reposing in his pocket. A newsboy stopped opposite him and drew out a copy as a matter of habit. Maughan handed over one of his scarce coins with a careless movement as if it were a fifty-cent piece and to keep the change. Then, grown reckless he sauntered with the paper to the counter and asked for a package of cigarettes.

With exactly forty cents left he returned to his seat and idly began to read. One whole page was devoted to detailed reports of the week's baseball games, another held local news, interspersed with annoying "liners," two pages were plate "fill up," and the rest seemed to be given over to flaring real estate advertisements and small ads. Corfield had a whole page in which he had let himself loose in pointless alliterations. The revealing feature of his advertisement was that the only specific lots mentioned were the very ones Maughan had been offered as a special favour.

In the upper corner of the second page Maughan found the brand marks, two columns of small black cuts of cattle with the ranch brand in white on the shoulder, the theory being that strayed cattle would be returned thereby to their rightful owners. Maughan examined the page with sudden interest. One by one he scanned the brands and the ranch names and addresses. Wampole's Double LF was there second from the top; and down in the bottom corner was the Circle D of which Corfield was so proud, though the value of a Milk River brand in a Medicine Hat paper was obscure. Maughan decided that it was Corfield's vanity.

Beside the brand advertisements was a two-inch space announcing in formal language the straying of four steers from the Double LF, with fairly complete descriptions and a warning against holding. By the size of the space Wampole was evidently disturbed. Until the dinner bell rang Maughan sat back in the chair, his head against the

handkerchief, staring at the ceiling and the curling wreaths from the succession of cigarettes he smoked.

At noon next day he telephoned for his horse, gave up his room, placed his two suitcases in the care of the hotel, and rode away south up Toronto Street, smoking the last of the package of cigarettes he had purchased the afternoon before.

The proprietor of the Provincial came out on the steps as he waited for his horse and watched him strolling up and down.

"Ah—you have friends?" he queried.

"Oh, several," returned Maughan pleasantly, and continued his stroll.

The proprietor leaned on the railing, looking his disappointment, until the long, straight back had disappeared up the street. Then, with a shake of his head, he returned to his doze behind the counter.

Maughan continued up Toronto Street, over the ridge, out on the prairie. The sun was hot, but the breeze was cool and energizing, and he drew long noisy breaths and laughed once or twice as he loped along. His direction was straight south, the Cypress Hills always before his face.

In an hour he came to the scene of the recent fire. A thin screen of black lay over the country for miles on either hand, closer inspection showing that the winds had already scattered much of the ashes and beneath exposed the fresh green of new grass. Here and there a twisted, charred stem was the remains of a cactus stock, but apart from that the whole scene was like a black dust blown across the country by some evil wind. The trail showed a little sign of the fire, the brown layer of dust only a shade darker. A pungent odour still rose to the passing of his horse, but the devastation was singularly inconsequential and forgotten, and Maughan's memory of the fire seemed now absurdly unwarranted.

With his eyes fixed on the black line of hills he rode rapidly on. When he came to the branch that led to the

Double LF he pulled up and looked along it for several minutes, hesitating. But presently he swung along the main trail to the left, riding faster.

The prairie ahead was now but the foreground to a glorious range of wooded heights that raised themselves before him, fresh and green and inviting. Right across the horizon it stretched, though to the west it seemed to peter out within a few miles. Having seen the Cypress Hills many times from the cutbank south of the town, he knew that they ended in reality abruptly at no great distance on his right. The curious nature of them amid that flat waste of prairie had always attracted him from the distance of thirty miles.

Now, close up, he felt the lure more keenly. They seemed a beautiful compromise of Providence in the surrounding flatness, a reminder to the prairie dweller of the other great works of nature. Maughan, hungry and tired by this time, cantered eagerly toward them. He longed to revel in their cool, green depths, to hear again the rustle of leaves, the call of wild things, the whispered message of comfortable nature. The prairie had always been to him a thing that only simulated death, malignantly watchful—interesting always, but chokingly silent with full throat ready to burst into some such hideous howling as the coyotes made, an all-enveloping spirit that enticed while it threatened.

After a time he came to the shores of a lake that lay on the edge of the Hills. His horse advanced cautiously, strangely alarmed, snorting, thirsty but suspicious. Maughan dug impatient spurs into its sides.

Its nose was just touching the water when it jerked its head up with a rattle of bit and nickered. Maughan, wrapt in the pleasant scene across the water, came to life with a strange feeling of discomfort, of self-consciousness. The horse's ears were bent forward across the lake. Maughan peered into the shaded spaces among the trees less than three hundred yards away. He had no idea why

he should be disturbed by this thing that his horse saw or sensed, and as he realized that he was really startled he tried harder to discover what lay hidden somewhere ahead among the shadows.

Again his horse whinnied. It must be another horse in there, and Maughan imagined a dim movement from shadow to shadow, without shape or definition. As he continued to stare, a rifle shot crashed through the great silence, and the whine of a bullet above his head sent tingles through his scalp. Still he did not move. A second bullet followed the track of the first.

"Claude Ambrose," he muttered, a slow smile breaking over his thin face, "somebody doesn't like the looks of you. Two for warning, the third——"

He swung his mount about and trotted toward the north-west, never once looking back. And as he rode he puzzled.

CHAPTER XIV

A TENDERFOOT COWPUNCHER

IN a brown study Maughan came at last to the edge of the valley that held the ranch buildings of the Double LF. In the shallow depression a few carefully-guarded alders and willows had found a precarious footing and transformed the valley into a semblance of humdrum farm life as he knew it.

But the differences were striking enough to make him pull his horse up and sit looking down on the first ranch he had ever visited. Almost at his feet was the fireguard, to which several fresh furrows had been added the night of the fire; they gave the valley an air of exclusiveness, of being walled in, of something that, while it made its living from the prairie, was in essence distinct and unfriendly. The fireguard wound down the slope, skirted the buildings, swept wide of the corrals, and disappeared in a roll before coming about again in a wandering curve

to his feet. Maughan recalled the night of the fire—fiery Old Man Wampole, coolly grim Sergeant Prior, and the mad, sullen Archie with the attractive character of an irresponsible boy. He remembered, too, in the next breath a dark-skinned girl with peering eyes. Tightening the rein, he rode down toward the ranch house.

He was within forty yards of it before he felt any misgiving, but it swept over him then like a wave and twitched his rein hand so that his horse hesitated. Firmly then he urged it on.

What would be his reception? How much or how little meant the old man's invitation to return? To count on a hasty word shouted after him on such an occasion looked the height of folly with the front screen door of the Double LF within sound of horse's hoofs.

As he drew up before the ranch house and leaped to the ground he saw a dim movement behind the concealing screen, and then the door pushed open and Julia Kingsley was looking at him with smileless, unwelcoming, searching eyes. With one foot still in the stirrup he stood staring at her, and the blood mounted to his forehead. Yesterday afternoon he had left her, miserable, in her own rooms on the Esplanade. Twenty-four hours later she was thirty miles away, in a dress that altered her whole effect. In the short, divided grey skirt, hanging free from the hips, the tight-fitting high-legged tan boots, the white waist open at the neck in a deep V and edged by a loose scarf, she looked so much more competent and alert, less the dependent woman. While he felt that her garb was a masquerade to enhance her charms, he continued to stare in helpless silence. Then, suddenly, the gentle smile broke over his face.

"No wonder I'm surprised, Miss Kingsley. A day ago we were looking out over the river and the Esplanade. And now I find you here."

"I find you here." There was no answering smile.

He took the bit in his teeth. "You expected to."

"I guessed."

"Then you anticipated my own thoughts. I assure you, Miss Kingsley, that when I saw you last——"

Through the screen door, which Julia had closed behind her, Maughan caught a glimpse of a woman's hand, and then the door opened again and there emerged the elderly woman who had run to Old Man Wampole's side the night of the fire as the democrat dashed off toward Whispering Valley. The younger woman's face underwent a sudden change. A forced smile twisted her features, and her laugh rang out.

"Medicine Hat never thought you'd take a ride like this, Mr. Maughan, unless you had to," she said. "Come in. We're just sitting down to dinner."

She had glanced at the older woman as she spoke, and a grave nod had given consent. Mrs. Wampole's face was as grave as a mask. The motherly kindliness of it was smothered in the haunting lines of a great sorrow. She looked at Maughan, then at Julia, and without saying a word the reproach of it was so evident that Julia's forced smile vanished and a slight frown of rebellious protest and shame took its place.

Maughan read the nature of the scene and looked away. This was Archie's mother—and the other his fiancée; and of the two it was the mother who kept up the appearance of sorrow and wondered how anyone could forget.

"I've taken your husband at his word, Mrs. Wampole, and dropped around for a bite with you. I hope he feels no ill effects——"

Old Man Wampole himself burst the door open.

"And why should I, young man? Did you expect me to be broken like a piece of china by a crack on the chin? Not Old Man Wampole. But come in, come in. You don't know the West or you'd never try to explain a visit. Everyone keeps open house out here—even if I didn't think enough of you to give you a special invitation. We're just going to eat. Of course, the Double LF isn't the Provincial, but I bet a horse we can give you a steak you can put your teeth through, and I seldom find a

Provincial steak I can even dinge. I believe we have a salad to-night, too. Julia did that—we're not much for the tifficks on a working day. Are we, Jessie? Got to eat solid stuff on a ranch."

His wife's face lost none of its sombre brooding, and her husband turned away in obvious discomfort and led the way in. As Maughan passed him he whispered: "It's Archie. Don't take any notice." And his own face was grave as his wife's.

They sat down to a meal of steak and potatoes, bread, butter, a pie made of canned peaches, a freshly-baked cake, a salad, and coffee that seemed always to be flowing from Mrs. Wampole's right hand. Maughan ate heartily, all the time keeping up a running chatter of light conversation in which Wampole joined avidly and often inconsequentially.

When Maughan, as he frequently did, caught a reflection of the shadow of grief that sat at the head of the table he did not wonder the old man's wits sometimes went wool-gathering. Julia, silent, her eyes on her plate, seemed almost as depressed as Mrs. Wampole, now and then furtively, and apologetically, glancing at the older woman. There was no affectation in the mother's sorrow, but it was perhaps the more firmly established by the momentary forgetfulness of others. She was determined they should never forget while she lived to keep the memory alive. Maughan cursed Archie Wampole.

He recalled Corfield's hint that the father was interested in keeping Archie away, but he banished that from his mind as an accusation befitting a man with Corfield's distorted views of life. That bluff old fellow would never lend himself to evading a debt, especially when it entailed the absence of an only son and the crying grief of his mother. Plainly unhappy himself, the husband maintained constant siege on the solemnity of the household in an effort to cheer his wife.

In the midst of these reflections Maughan became aware that his host was addressing him.

"You lazy remittance men," he was saying, in his blunt way, "you're the curse of this country. You loaf about the West, living on the old folks back home, never working, but keeping others from it. You're responsible for most of the badness of town life. You can drink our young men under the table any time, and while they're sober you draw them into every vice that's going—gambling, one of the worst of them. If a son of mine——"

He stopped abruptly and swallowed a gulp of coffee.

"The only medicine I know for your kind is work," he went on, "real hard work. Look at yourself, young man. You have the physique, and I bet you have the temper and grit. Good hard facts, Jessie," meeting his wife's warning glance, "and facts won't hurt anyone that's honest. I wouldn't have a remittance man about the place——"

Maughan accepted another helping of steak from the old man's liberal hand and interrupted the flow:

"I'm vastly interested, Mr. Wampole. The only mistake you make is in including me in that class. But for the sake of argument, say I do live on money from home. You wouldn't have a remittance man about the place, yet here I am, dining with you. . . . What's more, I'm going to stay—right here on the Double LF."

The old man set down the meat fork and stared with open mouth.

"Yes," Maughan went on calmly. "So that's settled. But as I said, I'm not a remittance man. If I were I'm hanged if I'd see any amusement in riding thirty miles to eat with a cross old curmudgeon who wants to make me think he's a poor sort of host. And so to show you how much I want to work I'm taking on a working job at the Double LF—the harder the work the better. I'll do anything from washing the floors to minding the baby or bossing the outfit. And I'm not going to refuse any of the emoluments that go with hard work. For, you see"—he dug up from his pocket the three pieces of silver and

spread them on the table—"there's the total of my assets, all that stands between me and starvation."

His host's eyes bulged. Mechanically he picked up a forkful of potatoes and dropped it again. Maughan he was examining intently from the top of the table to the crown of his head.

"Surprised?" asked Maughan. "I thought you would be. I've been surprising a number of people since I came to Medicine Hat. I'm getting to like the sensation."

He did not look at Julia, though he was aware that she had not moved her eyes from him since he commenced to talk. Old Man Wampole, convinced at last that his guest was not joking, dropped his eyes cunningly to his plate. And in a moment he glanced at his wife.

"On your uppers, eh? Well . . . reckon I might find something for a new hand to do—rather than see him starve. Don't really need one, but I guess you wouldn't be much in the way till you learned enough to be useful. We've lost a few cattle lately, and I guess, compared with other ranches, I'm a bit short-handed. Ah—if you'll come at something near your value till you learn the business——"

"Any wage you say will do me—at the start."

"Well—ah—shall we say—ah—fifteen dollars for the first month? And your keep, of course."

Maughan had no experience of ranch wages; but he knew so little connected with a ranch, that even his keep seemed liberal. He was surprised, therefore, when Julia gave a short, unamused laugh.

"Be serious, dad!" Maughan started at the name she gave the old man who, two weeks ago, was indeed intended to be a father to her. "You ought to be ashamed to take such advantage of a tenderfoot."

The old man blinked, stammered, and said:

"Well, what do you think he should get, Julia? Remember he's awfully raw."

But Julia only shrugged her shoulders. She had had her say.

"What about—ah—twenty-five then?" Wampole suggested petulantly.

"All right. That'll do me—this month. I'll have to get my horse back to the livery stable and bring out my suitcases from the Provincial."

"Then the horse ain't yours?" grumbled his new boss. "I'll have to supply a mount?"

"Bob!" chided his wife sharply.

Wampole shrugged his shoulders. "I guess the bargain's sealed, young man. The women have decided. You can start right in to-night—or to-morrow after you come back from town."

"I'll start on Sunday," Maughan declared.

"And here's your first month's pay," said Wampole, placing a small pile of bills beside the new hand's plate.

"In the language of my new job," declared Maughan, "you're sure some boss."

The old man grinned and counted out a second pile.

"There's your second month's wages, too. *Now*, what do you think of me?"

"I think," replied Maughan, pushing the last pile back, "that you're going to need some watching. Beyond that I'll say nothing more; we want to be friends. My wages for the first month only are twenty-five. I'm not going to hold you up thereafter, but I'll be worth a good deal more then. Now what do you want me to start in at?"

"Better pitch in and lend Sing a hand. He's the cook of the outfit, and he's grumbling like blazes. I don't want the women to have to do the work."

"I'll run round and introduce myself to my immediate superior right away. If he can cook better than I can spoil things, he's wasted on a ranch—he should be in a railway construction camp."

"There's where you'll have to reckon with the boys," grinned Wampole. "They've ways of helping to train tenderfeet."

At the bunkhouse the first one he met was Texas Letten. The cowboy greeted him with surprise, and when he learned what was planned looked him over with eyes not devoid of suspicion. Maughan wondered at that as he followed Tex to his new task. Why should strangers persist in doubting him? In view of the forty cents in his pocket there seemed nothing unreasonable in taking to dish-washing at the Double LF.

"Larnin' ranchin'?" Tex asked over his shoulder. "'Cause yoh're a mile late in these parts——"

"Just learning to be a Westerner, Tex—and earning a living."

The foreman grinned and solemnly introduced him to the Chinese cook, who welcomed him with a scowl, having wished to bring out another Chinaman with whom he could gamble. But when Maughan whirled into the array of dinner cleaning, Sing relaxed a little.

"I'm not really engaged yet, Tex—don't start work till I get back from town on Sunday—but I want to see how I'll like my job before I burn my bridges. I'm doing this to-night for fun."

"No accountin' foh tastes, as the tramp said when they put him in a bath. People'll be ce'tain yoh crazy now."

Maughan laughed, wiped his hands on the kitchen towel, and started for the ranch house to retrieve his cap. As he reached the back door Julia Kingsley hurried through and stood directly in his path.

"Why are you here?" she demanded, boring him with her eyes.

"I forgot my cap."

She frowned impatiently.

"Oh, I see," he apologized. "Because I've only forty cents and have to eat."

"Don't waste any more words on me, Mr. Maughan."

For a moment he returned her steady gaze.

"I came—deliberately, Miss Kingsley."

"Ah-h!"

Her eyes dropped away from his. Smiling, he continued:

"I'd already had the good fortune to meet Mr. Wampole, and since I had to go to work——"

But she had turned her back on him and ran up the steps into the kitchen. Thoughtfully he followed. In the living room doorway he paused. For the first time he took it in—a number of calfskin and coyote rugs on the floor, and one large wolfskin; in the centre of one side a large base-burner stove and across the room a piano; in the middle of the floor a table whereon stood a cloisonné vase filled with cactus flowers, a portable book stand, a small pile of newspapers, and a gramophone horn. Figured muslin curtains over the three windows softened the glare of the westering sun, and inside them were heavy drapes drawn tightly back. On a wire stand against the front wall several pots of growing plants added a restful, comfortable atmosphere so different from the withered out-of-doors.

But all these details, though they registered themselves on Maughan's brain so that he never forgot them, were lost for the moment in what was happening in the room. Mrs. Wampole, holding the screen door open with her foot, was reaching back with a broom to a small heap of dust she had collected. Her husband was standing with a chair in his hand. Both were looking at Julia, who from beside the table was speaking.

"They can bring all I need in the buckboard. Claire will pack a suitcase for me."

"I'm so glad you can stay, Julia, dear," sighed the older woman. "I couldn't bear to think of your going back to-morrow. But you said——"

"Well, I'm going to stay," said Julia decidedly. "And I don't know for how long."

Maughan merely glanced at her, made a scuffle with his feet, and entered. And Julia Kingsley sailed past him with lifted head and went upstairs to her room.

CHAPTER XV

A SATURDAY EVENING

MAUGHAN was delighted that his companion to town was to be Texas.

"'Nothin' much doin' till we sta't on that round-up of year-olds for the new ranch business south of the Hills. 'Tain't often I get the chance to taste high life twice in as many weeks, and I shore ain't goin' to turn down any offuhs."

"Nothing could please me better, Tex. I feel like a lamb in a den of wolves when I'm in Medicine Hat without you."

"A nice woolly little lamb, yoh are," jeered Tex. "—I think I don't think. Yoh got a sleeveful somewhere."

Maughan looked guileless dissent, but said nothing. They tied his horse to the back of the buckboard, found it led beautifully, and settled down to the thirty-mile drive to town.

"Yoh shore said somethin', old hoss," agreed Tex, expectorating over the wheel. "That same cow-town's the ragin'est, rampin'est den of wolves this side of El Paso. It's shore some little hell."

Maughan opened his eyes in innocent surprise.

"But I was only joking, Tex. I've been living there for more than three weeks, and I'd come to the conclusion it was a singularly inoffensive place for a prairie town."

The cowboy laughed shortly and clucked to the running bronchos by way of immediate reply. The little team had settled into gallop the moment they left the stable, and they would continue it, up and down hill, till they reached the stable at the other end. The light brown dust rose in a thin cloud from their striking hoofs and imperceptibly but surely coloured everything in the buckboard.

Each of the deep-cut ruts of the trail held a broncho and a pair of wheels as rigidly as the rails of a railway track. To hit the ridges at such a speed would upset anything but a buckboard, yet the lines dangled loosely in Tex's hands. A buffalo trail angled across the path, in some mysterious way maintaining almost its relative depth even through the ruts, and the buckboard lurched dangerously, Texas letting his body sway easily with the rig; Maughan clutched at his companion to keep himself in the seat.

"Want to be shown how blind yoh were in that three weeks, old hoss?"

"I'm ready to be proven wrong, Tex."

"Want to see life that touches only the high spots?"

"Just what do you mean by the high spots?"

"Oh, nothin' nasty. Just a few o' them wolves—right in their dens."

"I don't want to get in any more trouble with the Mounted Police——"

"The Mounties don't interfere in town. Yoh safe . . . that is, if yoh got the nerve. Do yoh pack any ha'dware?"

"Pack any—what?"

"Tote a gat—carry a gun?"

"You mean am I armed? Why, no. Ought I to be?"

"Not if yoh haven't any hankerin' to commit suicide, son. Yoh'd be nothin' but a name on a tombstone next week—unless yoh got a draw like greased lightnin' and an eye like Dutch Henry. Totin' a gat, unless yoh've slept on it for yeahs, is about the quickest death I know some places. . . . And one of the places is Medicine Hat—unduhground, so to speak. That is, where I'm takin' yoh. A gun so't o' makes yoh feel yoh got to use it, and yoh'd shore feel that way where we're goin' to-night. Yoh'd want to shoot too easy—and the other fellow's shoot a second easiah. . . . Gats ain't as populuh as they oncet was. Don't go in much foh them in the o'dina'y way in town now."

"You can count me in on anything, Tex . . . anything decent."

The cowboy glanced at him with a twinkle. "Yoh draw a line, eh? So do I. Mighty pe'ticulah about gals, I am, since one rolled me foh two months' pay down Arizona way. A peacherino she was, too. Way it strikes me about the gals is—— Oh, well——"

He sank into a long silence, crouched forward with his elbows on his knees, eyes fixed on the blackened swath of prairie through which they were passing.

"Texas, do you think anything like that—a gun, I mean—has happened Archie Wampole?"

Texas heaved himself upright in the backless seat.

"If I knew the fellow who drew a gun on Archie Wampole he'd figure in the death column the next day shore. Archie wouldn't ha'm a fly."

"Then you don't think he's——"

"Look heuh, old hoss, I'm a friend of Archie's. I ain't guessin' at nothin' till I know a bit mo'e about it."

"Texas," said Maughan, laying his hand on the cowboy's arm, "I'm a damn sight more anxious about Archie Wampole than you are. You don't need to be afraid to speak out."

The cowboy glanced at him suspiciously.

"What the blazes yoh got to do with Archie?"

Maughan pulled himself up sharply. "Naturally I'm interested. I was with his fiancée when he disappeared. I heard the story when she did. I feel kind of responsible for finding him."

Texas shrugged away to his own side of the seat.

"Responsibility be damned! Yoh got a heap o' talk. . . . And what I'm wonderin' is why yoh talk so much."

Maughan considered rapidly. "No use trying to fool you, Texas," he laughed. "Fact is, I'm after that five thousand the old man's offering for Archie. I didn't tell you that, before be paid me my month in advance, I had exactly forty cents in my pocket—nothing more. I need that five thousand bad."

Texas burst into a loud laugh.

"Yoh don't tell me! Broke to the wide! Well, wouldn't that kerflumux yoh? Gosh! The toff of a cockney——" His eyes narrowed in sudden suspicion. "But yoh shore got to show me."

Maughan dived into his pocket and exhibited the twenty-five dollars in bills and forty cents in silver. Texas whistled.

"Yoh don't tell me the old cuss only allowed yoh twenty-five a month? The robber! Yoh wuth fo'ty—fellow can ride like yoh. Gettin' a Westun seat quicker'n any tenduhfoot I evuh knew. Next month yoh beat him up foh fo'ty at least."

"Next month he's going to hand me over five thousand dollars. I'm going to find his son."

"So that's why yoh out at the Double LF?" mused Texas, his eyes fixed on the distant standtank that stood at the top of Toronto Street.

"Why, no. There wasn't any other place to go. I didn't know a soul but Old Man Wampole. Just the same, it keeps me in touch with that five thousand." He saw a swift expression pass across the cowboy's face. "Not that I expect to pick up any information there, but I'll be on the spot if anything happens."

"Why not ask Archie's best friend, old hoss?"

"You mean that you know——"

"Not a cussed thing . . . 'cept that Archie nevuh had an enemy I knew of."

Maughan laughed and Texas turned on him angrily.

"Mean to say I don't know what I'm talkin' about? I guess nobody knows Archie like I did—no, not even his mothuh."

"Do you know Dan Corfield?"

The cowboy's brows knit quickly.

"What yoh mean? Know that geezuh? I reckon I do. . . . But yoh shore make a mistake if yoh think he and Archie—— Say, if you only knew!"

"I know Dan Corfield holds a fistful of Archie's I.O.U.'s."

"That don't make 'em enemies. Corfield holds mo'e than Archie's in this burg, I reckon. It means Corfield's the last one to want Archie out of the way. He don't lose a cent he can put his finguh on, by hook or crook."

"How did Archie get in his debt, Texas?"

"Now yoh talkin'. Come along with me to-night, old hoss, and I reckon yoh'll know how . . . unless Corfield's taken fright."

"But I thought you were going to take me to see high life to-night. Corfield's a Bible Class teacher——"

"And a lot else, son. To-night we'll see some of the else."

CHAPTER XVI

IN CALIGNI'S GAMBLING JOINT

AFTER dinner that evening Claude Ambrose Maughan, with no known alias, and Jake Letten, commonly called Tex, strolled down the fourteen steps of the Provincial and made for South Railway Street at the leisurely pace of cowboys in town with nothing to do but amuse themselves. They looked like cowboys, too, for Maughan had invested in a pair of chaps, a red flannel shirt, and a Stetson, getting credit for most of it. Conscious of the atmosphere created by his new garb, he was for dropping in to the European bar and sampling its liquids. But Texas drew him on with a firm hand.

"Where we' goin', old hoss, yoh don't want no booze cloudin' yoh up. If I was goin' alone—— But I'm not, and I shore got to look aftuh a tenduhfoot. I'm prob'ly savin' yoh life, . . . but for massa's sake don't tempt me too much; I ain't got the grit to fight it long. I'm goin' to have a handful, I can see that. . . . They lookin' foh yoh, I reckon."

A neat, straight form in red rounded the corner and stopped before them.

"Hello, Maughan! Wondering where you'd gone. Cowboy, eh?" Sergeant Prior laughed, then sobered and fixed Maughan with his dark eyes. "Ah—out at the Double LF. I see!"

"That'll be my address for a month anyway, Sergeant. I have the pay in my pocket now."

"One can't say you're not tasting every dish we have to offer—and without wasting time about it. So the old man's going to give you a chance—for holding his head the night of the prairie fire? Far-sighted chap you are."

"Very far-sighted," Maughan agreed placidly, "ever since I gave up the monocle. Beastly in-the-way things they are. Old Man Wampole's giving me more than a chance—to the extent of twenty-five dollars for a hundred dollars' worth of work. Good-bye. Texas and I have an engagement."

Reproducing Texas' lounge as faithfully as he could, he drew his cowboy friend along with him and left the Sergeant standing.

Long after they had passed they could hear that the Sergeant continued to stand.

Texas spoke from the corner of his mouth:

"What's the row between you and the Mounties?"

"I don't quite know. Perhaps I was too frank with the Inspector at our first interview. You don't seem to be accustomed to the truth in this country."

"We aren't accustomed to it from chaps like yoh, old hoss," chuckled Texas.

"I've discovered," said Maughan solemnly, "that there's nothing like the truth for confusing people. Also it gets things stirred up."

"If the Sergeant wasn't standin' there wonderin' whethuh he shouldn't arrest you right off, I'd shake yoh hand. Yoh shore gettin' Westun with a rush."

"That's my ambition, Texas."

They were heading up Main Street.

"Now we're going to deliver that message of Miss Kingsley's to her sister," said Maughan.

Texas pulled up. "Yoh go on alone. I'm not much with the gals—so't of all feet and hands."

"Honest, Texas, I don't believe she'll look at you while I'm around in this outfit. I'm the one that's latest on the scene—and she doesn't know my resources yet."

"She ain't alone in that, friend. She thinks yoh something of a toff."

"Ask the Inspector what kind of a toff I am," laughed Maughan.

At first Claire Kingsley was more interested in the messenger than in the message, but Maughan drew her attention again to the note he had handed her.

"I think it's about sending her things out with us. Your sister intends to stay."

"Stay—Julia stay out there! Why, we had it all planned to start a new dress for her on Monday. Why—why——" She stopped to read the note.

When she was through she lifted a flushed face to Maughan.

"I'm afraid I can add nothing to what you read," he said.

"But—but what will I do? I can't stay here alone."

Tears welled in her large, soft eyes, and Maughan became interested in the side of the doorway where he was standing.

"Do come in, Mr. Maughan. It's so good to see a friend again." The full battery of her eyes was turned on.

"Sorry, Miss Kingsley, but Texas is with me. We're—we're spending the evening at a friend's."

"Why not with me?" She pouted.

Maughan commenced to back down the steps.

"I think we're going to be with Mr. Corfield—studying the Sunday School lesson for to-morrow, I suppose. We'll call for the things to-morrow afternoon."

From the dusk of Fourth Avenue Texas suddenly dived into the gloom of a lane running behind the Toronto

Street stores. It was after ten, and the late but sudden Western evening had fallen like a visible mantle over the town. It seemed only a few minutes since the round, red disk of the sun had slid behind the cutbank, and the western sky was still light with a localized afterglow; but night, in all its soft early silence, lay about them. For the coyotes had not yet tuned up their nightly hunt. Texas drew Maughan close against a brick wall.

"Now, a last wo'd, old hoss. I'm handin' out the goods, and yoh listen with every eah you got. Where I'm takin' yoh's no place to spring the gay stuff, or the innocent. They'd shore misunduhstand and do things nasty and quick. Keep an eye on yoh Uncle Dudley and yoh hands above the table."

With tapping finger he drove it home on Maughan's flannel shirt.

"This outfit helps a little, but they remembuh yoh as the guy with the breeches and the peaked cap, and I guess yoh've got a smell like a tenduhfoot yet."

"But I'm learning fast—you said so yourself, Tex."

The cowboy groaned. "Gawd, I see what's ahead of us to-night. Befoh yoh through to-night yoh'll think yoh nevah knew what larnin' was. And foh Gawd's sake don't put yoh hands neuh yoh hips, whatevuh happens. They'll think yoh drawin', and that'll be about the last yoh'll appeah in public."

Someone slid into the mouth of the lane and brushed into them, stopping then and backing away.

"Oh, you, Tex! Having a go to-night? Brought your friend, I see. Good!"

They moved on together deeper into the shadows of the lane, turned a sharp corner of a projecting building, and halted before a low door in an otherwise blank wall. The stranger knocked twice sharply, passed on a few steps, and returned to repeat the knock. The door opened without a sound and admitted them into a denser blackness. When it closed behind them a door ahead slid back and they looked into a dimly-lit basement

filled with broken boxes and crates. Through the wall to the right came the subdued sound of voices.

The stranger went straight to a large packing box, felt behind it. It slid back and revealed a door. They entered.

CHAPTER XVII

THE DEN OF WOLVES

THEY were standing in a large low-ceilinged room lit by several gas jets fixed in walls and ceiling. The air was thick with smoke, guttural laughter, the tinkle of glasses, the sliding of cards, the crisp words of the players at a dozen tables. Maughan, shifting his eyes lazily about, took in the whole scene in one movement. About the room a score of tables were scattered, most of them already occupied.

In a mottled career Maughan had never seen such a cosmopolitan crowd sitting down together with such goodwill—reckless cowboys, well-dressed business men, loose-collared loafers, careless ranchers, a few selvedge-marked remittance men, several foreigners; and in a corner a table, spread with a marked cloth, surrounded by Chinese. Dice rattled, cards flipped, poker chips clicked. From the table of Chinese came sudden gusts of throaty exclamations and then tense silence.

Already the air was heavy with smoke and the fumes of liquor—a room that was never properly aired. How these men of the open could stand it through a night session was the first concentrated thought that came to Maughan. The lights flashed from the shiny surfaces of the cards, from the rolling dice and the trays of glasses, from the oiled hair and white aprons of the waiters who passed from table to table taking and delivering orders. The bald head of a man before him shone like a mirror.

One of the waiters, moving expertly about the room, Maughan recognized as the barber who had cut his hair

little more than a week ago; he had reflected at the time that the fellow had fallen into a groove he could never hope properly to fill. Here he was at home. Maughan guessed that they were beneath Caligni's barber shop.

At a side table, as his eyes wandered carelessly about, he recognized a popular local doctor, recently married to a fine young woman from the East and reputed to have turned over a new leaf to celebrate his good fortune. In a corner sat two of the leading merchants, evidently awaiting their partners. The proprietor of the Provincial grinned at him from another angle, his partners a railway conductor on a through train and two highly-paid locomotive engineers. This seemed to be the place of all others to meet the general run of citizens of Medicine Hat.

In the extreme corner, beside the door through which the waiters were bringing the filled glasses and carrying them away empty, a solitary big figure slouched over a table. The smoke was too thick to make him out immediately, but Texas' fingers squeezed Maughan's arm significantly. Caligni entered the far door and fell into a chair beside the man, leaning across to hear something the other was saying. Then the Italian turned about, saw Maughan, and came rapidly across the room with half-trotting steps. As he rose from his chair he stretched out and pressed a button, and Maughan could dimly hear a distant ringing that somehow made him more alert and watchful. As Caligni came, two cowboys lounged across to the solitary figure and made as if to sit down at the table, but the man waved them away.

Three waiting players around a nearby table called out to Texas.

"Trot along, Tex," Maughan urged. "I can look after myself."

But Tex did not move from his side. And then, just as Caligni was holding out his hand, someone entered the far door and dropped into one of the three empty chairs at the table the Italian had just left.

"Glad to see you, Mister Maughan. Knew you'd come—they all do. It's the only fun in town, eh, Tex? Come and join us in a game. Tex, your friends are calling for you. I'll look after Mister Maughan. Friend of yours at the table," he said to Maughan, as he drew him on down the room. "We'll have a nice little game."

Corfield rose from behind the table with a grin and held out his hand.

"Well, well! This is the second spot to come to in this burg. Corfield the Cordial's office first, then Caligni's little parlours. Don't do much of it myself, don't believe in it, but I always say a man should know both sides of the slate to be able to talk about either. I'll have a lesson to-morrow for my Bible Class that's more than the twaddle of those hear-say fellows who shun evil as if there's nothing to learn from it. I always say the average preacher doesn't know the darndest thing about sin—not really. If he does he shouldn't. I can stand losing a trifle now and then to get the experience the preachers don't get. Shake hands with Clif Mason. Never had a better partner in a game than Clif—or in a business deal either. Clif owns half the stores in town—and he didn't make the money for it down here, did he, Caligni?"

"My friends never make much or lose much," said Caligni suavely, rubbing his hands. "Sit down, Mister Maughan."

Mason ran his huge cigar to the other side of his mouth, tilted his head to get away from his own smoke, and looked up at Maughan.

"A real sport—I can see it all over him," he commented, as if talking to himself. "One of the best. We got room for the likes of him in Medicine Hat."

"Why the chaps, Maughan?" asked Corfield. "Taking a carnival costume back home?"

"No, picking up a little about ranching while I'm here." He winked at Corfield meaningly. "I'm going in on a deal with a partner, and I want to hold my end up."

Caligni signalled to a waiter.

"Four whiskey-and-sodas—for four gentlemen," he ordered, winking about the table.

Maughan felt an insane impulse to get his fingers round the lean throat of the Italian. Texas lounged up from behind.

"Want a fourth?" he asked.

"Don't we look like a full house?" demanded Mason sourly.

"Keep yoh shirt on, Clif. I thought Caligni was too busy to play."

"I'm taking a night off with the boys, Texas," said the Italian in an oily voice.

"See you later, Tex." Maughan lazily picked up the cards Corfield had dealt.

The cowboy tugged at his lip, shifted from one foot to the other, and finally turned back to his clamorous friends down the room.

It was half-past one the next morning. The room was grey with smoke that seemed to have hardened where it gathered into a stifling, unbreathable mess. Liquor fumes struggled through and made the brain reel. A few of the tables were deserted. Several players lay over other tables asleep, snoring suffocatingly. Two or three were noisy with drink, but with a curiously stifled exaltation that showed they were never unconscious of where they were. Many games were on the point of concluding, but half a dozen delayed breaking up, including that surrounded by the Chinamen.

At the table in the corner next the bar door Maughan braced himself stiffly in his chair against the wall and looked over his hand, dropping and picking up cards with unmoved but bloodless face. He had changed seats with Mason on the plea that the reflection of the light on the wall behind Corfield hurt his eyes. Before him were six neat piles of poker chips and a seventh of accurately arranged slips of papers. From time to time one hand went down mechanically and straightened the piles. The other three sides of the table were almost bare.

Three sour, swollen faces gloomed over their hands. Restrained, helpless fury breathed from them like a visible cloud. At every movement the Englishman made three pairs of sullen eyes flicked to him and away to each other. Maughan sat motionless, save for the wandering hand; not a word did he utter but the essential ones of the game.

A dozen times through the evening Texas had torn himself from his friends and sought the corner table, and each time he viewed the increasing pile of papers beside Maughan with a growing scowl. And as he turned away, a grin, doubtful but admiring, came into his tanned face. When at last his own game broke up, he attached himself to Maughan's table as a spectator. Mason turned heavy eyes up to him with an oath.

"Here, Tex, get into this—game. I'm on the rocks to-night—pretty near there in another way, too, judging by the pile your English friend has beside him. I can't get a decent card or do a thing that pulls off." He swore vilely and thrust an angry finger into his wilted collar. "This new friend of yours has the devil's own luck. Oh, you needn't grin," he threw viciously at Maughan as the latter smiled wanly. Then, feeling that he had gone too far, he snapped out: "What do I owe you?"

Maughan made a deliberate calculation of the pieces of paper with Mason's name signed to them and passed the total over. With an oath that was like a knife slitting Maughan's throat Mason reached for the slips and counted them over, then with another oath detached the amount from a huge roll of bills and threw it across. As he stamped through the private door, Maughan picked up the cards and commenced to shuffle. Corfield's bloodshot eyes watched feverishly.

"I don't think I should play any more to-night," he said. "The missus doesn't like me to be out too late Sunday morning."

"Had enough?" asked Maughan tauntingly, but so lifelessly that Texas regarded his pallid face in wonder.

Corfield's eyes met the Italian's.

"We'll give Tex a few minutes," he decided.

Caligni proceeded to pour oil on the troubled waters.

"Oh, by all means give Tex a few minutes." He lifted his head and looked over the thinning room. "Time to be going, boys," he called. Then he returned to the game. "Never deny anyone from the Double LF anything. Since Archie's gone—— But there'll never be anyone to take Archie's place. A great sport, Archie. Lose like a gentleman and come up smiling for another round."

"Archie Wampole play much?" asked Maughan carelessly.

Caligni glanced round the table with a laugh.

"Just every Saturday and Sunday and often between times. That's all. Regular as clockwork he was at the week ends. His people thought he was spooning in town. Yes, Archie was a frequent player. I guess I ought to know."

He opened his coat and took from an inner pocket an elastic-banded wallet from which he extracted another elastic-banded wad of paper slips.

"There's what Archie owes me to-day, the son of a gun. And damn well he knows it. Skipped out to——"

Texas leaned across the corner of the table and interrupted in a quiet voice—oh, a very quiet voice:

"Reckon yoh best not finish that, Cal. Yoh don't mean it. Say yoh don't—and damn quick about it."

Caligni laughed boisterously. "Course I don't mean it. Never was a better sport than Archie Wampole. Never had a better friend than Nap Caligni. Archie would pay if he was alive."

"Archie nevuh sloped a debt," said Tex. "If he don't pay up, there's some o' the rest of us will."

Corfield's face had shown no interest. Maughan did not appear to be listening, but he was watching Corfield.

The game had continued half an hour when the oily-haired waiter entered and whispered to Caligni, who rose hastily and looked out into the room, now empty save for

themselves. The waiter was putting out all the lights but the one behind their own table. Caligni went down the room, conversed for a few seconds with the waiter, and returned. The servant left the room hurriedly.

"We'll have to go now, gentlemen. Two o'clock."

Maughan made a petulant noise with his tongue. "Oh, what's the hurry? Have another hand. I'm not a bit tired."

He was leaning back against the wall, his face deathly wan and white in the clouded light. Heavy bags hung beneath his eyes. The veins on the thin hand outstretched over the pile of slips showed strangely dark and prominent.

"It'll be daylight in twenty minutes," snapped Caligni, no longer suave and oily.

With a quick movement that carried a menace he swept up the cards and thrust them into his pocket.

"What do we owe you, Mister Maughan?"

His manner was nervously abrupt, and his eyes flickered furtively. None of the other three made any comment; Caligni's decision was final. Maughan began slowly to set down the figures, with many halts and corrections. After several minutes, during which Caligni and Corfield shifted uneasily and the Italian's breath came audibly, Maughan passed the sum across to Texas with the slips.

"Count 'em over, Tex, will you? I can't seem to make them out right."

Tex took the slips from the inert hand. Caligni reached for them impatiently.

"Here, let me. I'm more used to making up sums like that."

Texas swept the extended hand roughly aside and bent over the figures.

"Right to a cent, old hoss," he declared, after a laborious counting.

He passed each player his own slips and the total. They settled with nervous haste. Texas lolled back in his chair. As the last bill disappeared in Maughan's

pocket he lazily drew a cigarette and proceeded to light it.

"Reckon we'll hang about a while, Cal. I'm fagged. Corfield can scoot if he's afraid of being caught out Sunday mo'nin'."

The Italian's face went darker.

"You can't, you can't!" he screamed. "The Mounties might see you. I can't take the risk. You must go—right away."

Texas shifted his position in his chair and let his hand fall carelessly over the back of it.

"Why so anxious, friend?"

Five burly fellows entered the door near their table and spread out through the darkened room as if to clear up the night's mess. Caligni stood beneath the one light remaining. Maughan slipped inconspicuously around the corner of the table toward him.

There was a sudden movement in the room behind Texas. Just as several pairs of arms closed on him, the cowboy's hand streaked to his hip pocket—too late. Caligni's hand shot out and the room went dark.

Maughan was momentarily safe behind the table. Their attackers were evidently not bothering about him at the moment—their hands were busy elsewhere. Texas was struggling like a maniac, cursing, shouting to Maughan. Then close to the gas jet behind the table something flashed and the next instant the light was on. Caligni was lying on the floor where Maughan had thrown him. And underneath the light Maughan stood, a cigarette lighter in one hand, in the other an ugly Smith and Wesson revolver.

The five waiters fell away from Texas, hands up. Caligni raised his hands where he lay. Corfield was far down the room, slinking through the darkness. Maughan swayed uncertainly forward and handed the gun to the cowboy.

"Here's your gun, Tex." His face widened into the sweetly attractive smile. "I'm—I'm afraid I'm——"

He slid to the floor in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XVIII

TEXAS COUNTS HIS FINGERS

"GOSH a'mighty!" muttered Texas, rumpling the oily black hair before the pushed-back Stetson. "I don't unduhstand yet—nothin' but that yoh shore got yoh nerve with yoh. You an innocent little lamb—like the very devil! . . . Innocent as the rattler that's just swallowed a toad. And heuh I thought I was doin' the hono's—so't o' initiatin' yoh into high life!" He spat indignantly at the roadway.

Maughan leaned forward in the buckboard and sank his head into his hands.

"Don't talk about it, Tex. I can smell the place yet—and see those lights dancing up and down—and your face and Caligni's jumping about. I'd have keeled over two hours before if I could have afforded the luxury of unconsciousness. I never could stand air like that. If you don't drop it I'll get sick right here on the Esplanade, like a common drunk, and disgrace you. Oh, for a breath of sweet prairie breeze to clear away the fumes of it! . . . I find I haven't the stomach I had ten years ago."

They were rattling up the Esplanade in the buckboard toward Mrs. Cowle's. Until lunch they had slept like logs, and straight from the table they had gone to the livery stable and hitched up. Maughan it was who remembered Julia Kingsley's requirements.

Claire Kingsley was watching for them from the balcony, and she had the door open for Maughan before he reached the steps. Her face was wreathed in ingratiating smiles, through which ran a chord of sly satisfaction. She was dressed in a neat brown suit and tight-fitting hat, and the great coils of light wavy hair were gathered about forehead and neck in soft and becoming lines. A gloved hand she extended to Maughan.

"I've a surprise for you," she gurgled. "I'm taking Julia's things out to her myself—in the buckboard with you."

Maughan almost gasped. He was completely unprepared, and Claire's plan struck him as a possible source of infinite trouble and inconvenience.

"But—but——"

"There aren't any buts," she pouted, pointing to the two suitcases in the hall. "I can't stay here alone."

She lifted tear-damp eyes appealingly to Maughan. "You wouldn't just *hate* me to go, would you?"

Maughan struggled to produce a blush.

"Hate it?" he said. "What I hate is having to refuse you—anything. But stern facts have a way of intruding themselves before our pleasures, Miss Kingsley. The buckboard simply wouldn't stand the load."

The wet eyes went wetter. "Oh, you just must arrange it somehow, Mr. Maughan. I'm not so very heavy. I could sit on your knee—or Texas might sit in the back."

Maughan had been examining the two suitcases. On one were the initials "C. R. K." He seized the other and backed away.

"Unfortunately, Miss Kingsley, there's a lot of kit of my own, and I've already accepted my month's pay to start work to-night. But I don't suppose your sister will stay long. If she does she'll send for you, I know. Awfully sorry, but——"

Raising his Stetson, he almost ran down the board walk to the gate, dumped the suitcase in the back of the buckboard, and leaped in beside Texas.

"Beat it for home," he whispered, "and fast."

"Did she throw you out?" grinned Texas.

"She wanted to come too."

Texas considered it as he clucked the bronchos into their tireless gallop.

"You shore do get my goat. Couldn't tear yoh away from her sistuh. I thought—— Oh, hell! I been thinkin' a lot of rot about yoh."

He fell into a long silence as the bronchos breasted the rise from Toronto Street. At the top he got out and tied the bouncing suitcases to the slats of the buckboard. For fifteen minutes thereafter neither spoke.

It was Maughan broke the silence:

"So that's where Corfield got Archie's I.O.U's?"

Texas studied him anxiously, lit a cigarette, carefully extinguished the match and tossed it into the trail.

"Head cleared a bit, old hoss?"

Maughan took several ravenous whiffs of the fresh breeze, nostrils dilating and contracting like a thoroughbred horse's.

"Fit for anything, Tex. Go ahead."

"Cripes, I got to or bust. . . . But first of all, I'm goin' to take the libe'ty of givin' yoh some advice. I don't say yoh need anyone's advice, old hoss, but I'd shore feel bad if I left it too late. Yoh carryin' too big a head o' steam—goin' a bit too speedy foh this patch o' simple rural life. Some crazy loon's goin' to get in the way and be a corpse——"

"I'm only learning to be a Westerner, Tex. You advised it—all my friends advised it."

Texas waved an impatient hand and spat expertly at the flying heels of the horse before him.

"Yoh've gone miles west of the West, old hoss. Yoh somewhere out in the Pacific by now, I reckon. About the time yoh month's up at the Double LF yoh'll be round the world and kickin' yoh own pants from behind . . . havin' kicked everybody else's till they got out o' the way. O' course, it's shore some gall o' me——"

"This Caligni, Tex, what about him—who is he?"

"Caligni? Oh, he's the barber—— No, steady a bit, he's the ownuh of the barber shop. Lots mo'e profitable things for Caligni than handlin' shears."

"So I gather. Where does he live?"

Texas clacked his tongue. "Don't waste yoh time on that slant. The Mounties chased up that clue long ago. But just because Archie and the gal got into Cal's house

somehow during the storm, and Archie didn't seem to be happy about it, ain't no reason for jailin' Cal. Yoh can't hang a man for lettin' two lost ones in, or smilin' at them when they're there. If yoh ain't got somethin' mo'e interestin' than that to talk about, let me do the spoutin'. How did yoh know Caligni was goin' to lay for us when we came out with all that money?"

"I only imagined what I'd do myself if I were in Caligni's place."

The cowboy's eyes came round in a slow half circle with the minimum movement of his head. Surprise, admiration, doubt, and the slightest touch of suspicion struggled for expression.

"Mothuh o' Moses! If yoh go into the gamin' business heuh—and I shore would if I was yoh—I'll get out o' town. This wouldn't be any place for a common cow-punchuh. Say, old hoss, yoh got it ovuh me like a tent. I don't sabe. I got thirty-seventeen questions to ask and I don't know where to sta't. How'd yoh get my gun?"

"Helped myself to it when you were warning me in the lane. I fancied we might need it—and they'd expect you to have it."

Texas' face broke into a smile that grew to a convulsive chuckle.

"Add pickpocket to the othuh counts the Mounties have again yoh. But how'd yoh think—what made yoh——"

"I've trotted about a bit, Tex. I've played in a few gambling hells, from Johannesburg to Dawson City."

"I ain't ce'tain," ventured Texas, "that yoh ain't the devil himself. Gunman, thug, pickpocket." He ticked them off on his fingers. "What next? I got seven mo'e finguh's at yoh' se'vice, old hoss."

"But this is not a confession, my friend. You make a virtue of my frailties."

Texas grinned. "I bet my silk neckerchief Corfield and Cal and Mason'd give ten dolla's each to be intuduced

to one of them frailties. But don't draw in on a friend. I'm fair woozy to know all about it. . . . What gets me is how you'd think— Why, I been droppin' good coin into Caligni's pocket foh two yeahs, and I nevuh saw anything like that happen down there befoh. Some rough-house, a quiet shot or two, but nothin' real serious. But yoh knew——”

“I knew because . . . I was out of money. And I needed some badly. And I'm such an easy mark I knew they wouldn't lose it to me quietly. Corfield thinks I'm a bloated plutocrat——”

“I don't know what that is, but if it's any worse than—— And yoh want me to think yoh a rowdy rough-neck.”

“I'm telling you the truth, Tex. Nobody believes me when I'm telling the truth, and it's a habit I got into as a child. Fact is, Tex, I never shot a man in my life—never shot *at* one, though I've been the target three or four times and I never grew to like it.”

Texas held up the three fingers stubbornly.

“Tryin' to cut out the gunman finguh. It don't go. ‘Gunman’ stands. That bunch was waitin' foh yoh. I saw it soon's I got inside. That's why I wanted to break in and see the game was on the level.”

“Well—was it? You were in for half an hour.”

“Aw, what's half an hour in a night like that?”

Maughan smiled out over the prairie.

“How much did I win from you, Tex?”

“Oh, about four-fifty. Good it was only half an hour.”

Maughan pulled out the roll of bills and peeled one off.

“Make it five even, Tex. I don't want to be bothered with change.”

The cowboy thrust his hand back indignantly. “What yoh take me foh—a tin-horn?”

“But I can so well afford it.”

“That's got nothin' to do with it. Just the same, if

yoh don't mind tellin' a friend, how much did you clean up?"

"One hundred and seventy-eight dollars. Needed it, too."

"Great Scott!"

"And so, as a special favour, I wish you'd take this fiver."

"If yoh wasn't a tenduhfoot—I mean, a stranger—I'd baste yoh one in the eye foh off'in' it."

Maughan sighed.

"Then get another finger ready, Tex. Most of that hundred and seventy-eight dollars I sharpened."

The long whip in Texas' hand lashed out at a horse's ears, and a pair of heels lifted into the air above the dashboard and fell back without halting the pace. The cowboy sat contemplating the rump of the disgusted broncho with blinking eyes.

"Say," he murmured admiringly, "I got ten toes, too."

"You see," explained Maughan, "they were so busy laying for me they didn't keep an eye on what I might do. And I assure you, Texas, on my honour as a gentleman, that I needed watching damn badly about them. Never saw card tricks work so easily in all my life. Enough to tempt a chap to go into the profession here."

"By—Gawd!" Texas' eyes were still fixed on the rump of the indignant broncho. "He fleeced Caligni and Corfield at their own game! And he don't pack even a toothpick!"

CHAPTER XIX

CATTLE RUSTLERS

BUBBLING excitement greeted them as they loped down the incline to the ranch house—excitement of cowboys and the blazing fury that smouldered within the sturdy frame of fiery Old Man Wampole.

To the disturbing record of ten strays within the last ten days was now added six year-olds. Old Man Wampole, in his impatient way, had ignored the plans of his foreman and started out on Saturday, after Tex and Maughan had left for town, to round up a few of the handiest of the year-olds planned as next week's work. These he had run into one of the corrals.

It was part of the old man's mortification that his impatience had resulted so disastrously: during the night the gate of the corral had been opened, six of the choicest year-olds driven out, and the gate closed again.

Chagrin, as well as impatience at the apparent apathy of the Mounted Police, had delayed him telephoning to the nearest post until just before Texas and Maughan returned. Maughan, the newest and least important of the outfit, heard the story without a word and sauntered away to the corral to examine the gate. He easily picked out the marks that were said to be made by the stolen cattle, and he did not even look wise. Inspector Barker had telephoned that, through short staff and the prairie fires all about, he could not send a man until the next day.

Texas, sulky because of the countermanded orders, but none the less determined to find the lost cattle, exploded into cowboy oaths when the boss's back was turned and rode away to the south-east. Maughan helped Sing so efficiently that the Chinaman deigned to smile. Early he retired to his tight little bunk and arranged his suit-cases.

Next morning after breakfast he was ordered to ride down to the International Cattle Company's ranch below the Hills and ask for a week's delay in the delivery of the year-olds, so as to give the outfit time to trace the missing cattle. He knew nothing of the country, but with the Hills to guide him there was no danger of losing his way, and he received the order with anticipation. He was longing for a ride, and the horse Texas had

selected for him pleased his not inexperienced eye. Also he wished to try his new cowboy clothes in the saddle.

He was mounted ready to leave, having paused to adjust himself to the new saddle and horse and garb, and to test his control of a quirt, when Julia Kingsley, in riding dress, came hastily out to him from the kitchen. She laid her hand on the neck of his horse.

"I want in the worst way to go for a ride," she said, in the tone of a spoiled little girl.

"Well, why not come along with me as far as the Hills? I can wait to saddle your horse."

The girl's eyes went back thoughtfully to the ranch house and a quick look of irritation flooded them.

"Can you think of any good excuse I can give?"

"But surely——"

"You're not blind, Mr. Maughan. The ordinary everyday things don't go at the Double LF now. I shouldn't *want* to ride—to do anything but mope and fret and weep. And I can't, I can't. I'll shriek."

"All together, then," he grinned. "I'll lend you my voice." Then, seriously: "But why do you try to stand it, Miss Kingsley? You're of mature age and your own boss."

"My own boss . . . up to a point. There are the decencies to observe—and Mrs. Wampole takes them out and polishes them every day." Her eyes flashed. "I don't see why I can't do as I wish. If Archie were here—— But she doesn't understand—she can't understand."

He leaned forward to catch and hold her eyes.

"Then why did you decide so suddenly to stay?"

She evaded the question. "I had no idea how the grief of another would get to stifle me. I suppose it's because I'm young and full-blooded and—and selfish. I shouldn't feel that way, should I?"

She tilted her head back then to look at him. But his face was firm and unsympathetic.

"You haven't answered my question. Whether you do or not . . . you shouldn't be here."

She drew away sharply. "Shouldn't?"

"I don't think I can explain that exactly, and I won't try. Just the same, I'm sorry for you, so very sorry for you." He looked away up the rise to the rim of the prairie for a few silent seconds. "I never was the least good at making explanations. . . . I only know that I wish you weren't here."

She considered him with questioning eyes.

"I'm coming with you," she said, her lips closing with sudden determination.

"I'm sorry but—you can't. Blame me all you wish for changing my mind . . . but I see the reason for your decision. You think I have plans."

"I know you have."

"I have—and therefore I'm riding alone to-day."

The colour deepened in her lovely dark cheeks, and for a moment he thought she was going to stamp her foot. But she restrained herself and spoke calmly enough, not looking at him.

"You'll be back before dark?"

"Certainly."

For a time she held him there without a word, her hand resting on the horse's mane. Suddenly she searched his face, her brows contracted anxiously.

"Are you trying to get ahead of the boys in finding those cattle?"

"It would be a fine feather in my cap."

"Keep right out of it, Mr. Maughan, please. You're new at the game—you know nothing about the ways of rustlers, and I tell you they're dangerous. With five years of jail hanging over them they shoot to kill, and on sight. You can't be of any real help—you'll only get into trouble. You couldn't even protect yourself. I've enough—we've enough to worry us as it is."

He touched his Stetson. "It's worth pretty nearly any risk to earn such solitude, Miss Kingsley, but no rustler would think me worth shooting at."

"I wish you'd leave it alone. Won't you?" Her

anxious eyes suddenly dropped before him and she laughed awkwardly. "We Westerners have you tenderfeet on our consciences, you know. We feel responsible."

"Perhaps the rustler will be as considerate. Anyway, no member of the Double LF outfit could promise not to do his best to find those cattle."

"Well," she called after him, "keep away from the Hills. You'll get lost in there."

She stood and watched him mount the rise, riding slightly sideways, as he had seen the cowboys ride, body swaying limply, knees loose on the horse's sides. For her benefit he was doing his best to look the part of his clothes. And as he disappeared over the crest, turning to wave back at her, she scowled at the ground and, shaking her head thoughtfully, returned to the house.

To reach the new ranching company's buildings—really the amalgamation in a limited company of the interests of three large ranchers—Maughan had only to skirt the western end of the Hills, turn quarter east, and follow the trail for seven or eight miles. For most of the distance he could see the flagstaff erected as one of the first flaunting signs of the new company.

As he rounded the Hills he left the trail for a time and rode slightly up the slope toward the trees, almost forgetting his errand. But hunger brought him back to his task, and by lunch he had arrived and delivered his message. He lunched with a dozen cowboys, and to them he told the story of the lost year-olds and made many inquiries without result that seemed of value.

About four o'clock he started back. But Julia Kingsley's fear, that he might not return before nightfall, in the end was justified.

CHAPTER XX

A REAL TENDERFOOT

DEEP in Maughan's mind a theory was working its way to the surface. The memory of those two rifle shots whining past his head on the shores of Elk Lake three days before had never been long from his thoughts. He had told no one, at first because he could not see what light anyone could throw on it, latterly because he had a mind to go his own way as long as he could. If the shots were accidental there was no need to discuss them. If they were intended for the purpose they fulfilled—or worse—— Maughan brooded over that an hour at a time.

Up to the end of the Hills he held to the back trail toward the Double LF. There he swung sharply in and skirted close to the border of the Hills around the north corner and along toward the east. In half an hour Elk Lake came within sight and there he began seriously to discuss with himself the purpose of his present route.

Why he was turning his back on the ranch trail he was not quite certain. He realized the strange lure of the Hills—he had heard some of the sinister stories told in the district concerning this wild strip of unknown and almost impassable country, and he knew something of the unspoken awe with which the strip of wooded heights was regarded by the ranchers and cowboys. Peculiar in their formation, unintelligible in their location, they inspired at sight with something more compelling than casual interest. Because they differed so widely from the prairie about them, because they offered nothing of value to the herds—though they intruded themselves in the heart of the ranching country—the cowboys knew no more about them than what they saw from the outside; nor wished to. Their hidden depths and withdrawn

heights, their shadows and isolated animal life, were a closed book; about them had wrapped itself vague mystery, repellent, irritating, yet seldom discussed openly.

On Maughan these facts were part of their attraction. Without definite plan, therefore, he kept to their shadows till he reached the shores of Elk Lake.

As he rode he thought much of Julia Kingsley. If she was puzzled about him, he was much more uncertain about her. How much did she know? How much did she suspect? Why had she so suddenly resolved to remain at the Double LF? To what extent was she involved in the mysteries that had started with the disappearance of Archie Wampole? As he turned inward on the shore of the lake he recalled her warning against riding in the Hills. Did that mean anything in particular?

"Claude Ambrose," he told himself, as he sank into a draw and started directly into the trees, "better drop the woman out of it. You never were much at reading the feminine mind. In other words, you're the male type. If she has her eye on you, keep your head turned." He rode on a few yards. "Ah, me! But reading her mind is easier than keeping her out of your own."

As he sank into the soothing green shadows of the gently murmuring trees, a strange exultation filled him. He wanted to shout, to take off his hat and turn his face full into the breeze and the soft verdure. He felt like a lad relieved of the watchful eye of an unsympathetic guardian. Out there the prairie was like a huge unwinking eye that stared stonily at him in haunting silence. In here was a life he was more familiar with, frankly breathing, rejoicing in his joys, congenial to his moods, intimate, friendly, calming. The masses of green took him in a cuddling embrace and laughed with him. He felt as if he had awakened from an unpleasant dream. A flight of birds cut through the trees in darting slants, chirping welcome to him. A scurry among the bushes was frankness itself compared with the unheard slink of the coyote and the granite stand of the gopher. The rustle of the

trees was varied as a beautiful tune compared with the hissing whistle of the wind through the dead prairie grass. The shadows were soft and seductive, salve to eyes and skin.

Before he thought, he yielded to the impulse and thrust his Stetson back on his head and shouted, listening to the echoes with laughing face. He felt like a discoverer, an adventurer in strange seas. Surely no human voice had ever before echoed so lustily in there!

He shouted again . . . and was surprised when the echoes suddenly came back to him with altered tone. He was startled, unreceptive, uncomfortably imaginative. The echoes were the same undoubtedly, but the effect was shudderingly different. He looked about with bewildered eyes to inquire the reason of his late friends the trees and the shadows and the soft moss. And of a sudden the trees and the shadows and the soft moss had withdrawn coldly within themselves and were no longer friendly.

He felt alone . . . there in the Cypress Hills where no one ever came on honest purpose. Every story he had ever heard about them flooded through his active brain, and the imagination of a different life added to them in vividly startling colours. He felt very much the tenderfoot.

In sheer ridicule of himself, or in bravado, he shouted once more—and listened breathlessly to the result.

Somehow his voice refused now to split into a million pleasantly-echoing fragments, a million fond companions, but returned to him in a storm of angry protests. It was as if a cloud of disturbed ghosts clamoured their resentment at his temerity. The Cypress Hills became another entity as the echoes still rang. They hated him, resented his presence, and jeered at him that now they had him at last in their power and would not let him go. The hard rock beneath his horse's feet clattered coldly back at him, and he discovered that Mascot was as disturbed as he. Maughan looked about quickly for the friendly wide spaces of the prairie and could not see them.

Mascot's ears were flickering back and forth, and Maughan found his eyes moving about from side to side in the growing gloom. He had sunk deep into the Hills without realizing the lateness of the time he had started. In there it was dark hours before out on the prairie. High over his head he could still see the bright sky that would be flooding the prairie with the brittle light of evening; and he longed to get back to it.

In a minute he would turn—but he wouldn't be frightened into flight. Julia Kingsley's warning came to him with a force that made him tingle.

In a minute——

A vague but violent movement surged out at him from the shadows close on his right. In the dimness it was like the all-enveloping cloud of a nightmare. He had no time to give it a second look, for promptly Mascot commenced to buck.

Having never been on the back of a bucking broncho he felt as helpless as a baby. With a squeal the mass of muscled flesh between his knees heaved into the air and came down with braced legs on the rocky ground. Maughan felt as if his spine was dislocated; his head went dizzy, and before he could collect his wits there came another leap and he shot from the saddle. . . .

His senses returned to a feeling of chilly numbness about head and shoulders, then to a sharp pain in his temple. Instinctively he made to raise his hand to comfort his head—and found that he had no power over it. Vaguely puzzled, he tried to discover the reason, and his head refused to bend.

From drooping eyes he saw coil after coil of rope wound round his body and arms and neck. He was seated on the ground, bound tight against the rasping bark of a large tree. With a trifling realization of proportions he recognized the rope as his own lariat, and he blinked down on it with muddled curiosity, struggling to remember how he had come to tie himself up. His shirt was wet through, and the chill of the night air quickly lifted him from the

semi-stupor that seemed to suit best the condition in which he found himself.

He stared about him. He knew where he was now, and recalled painfully what had happened up to the moment when Mascot had bucked him off. The memory sensitized ear and eye as he had never before experienced it. Behind him somewhere there drifted dully to him a steady noise, heavy, sustained, rumbling unhurried. He recognized it as the passing of cattle, moving undisturbed toward the west.

As it slowly died away, he heard another sound, much nearer this time. Surely it was a horse clipping along the rocky floor of the Hills. Only a few yards behind him it stopped abruptly, and there fell a moment's silence, a watching silence.

He could not turn his head. He felt eyes on him and could not return the stare, and it maddened him. Furiously he wrenched to loosen the bonds, and with the movement the horse behind him jerked backward and away a few hasty steps. But the rope would not give and he had to content himself with cursing the unseen rider.

His oaths were cut short by an ear-splitting explosion close to his head. So near was it that he wondered what were the sensations of death, if this whirling dizziness and bounding vividness of imagination—— A second shot close on the heels of the first convinced him that he was still alive.

He retained sense enough to realize the message of the shots, and with gritting teeth he ceased to struggle. A sudden idea came to him and he feigned fear, a frenzy of terror, a rapidly growing submission to nerves. His body trembled, his breath came in quick gasps, and he screamed. His scheme was justified by a short, mocking laugh from behind him, and he let his head suddenly go limp, as if he had fainted.

To his surprise a muffled exclamation broke from the lips that had just a moment ago laughed, a pair of spurred

heels clicked on the ground, and a not untender hand lifted his head from its uncomfortable position and leaned it back against the tree. But nothing came within range of his eyes save the edge of a hand. Forgetting himself, Maughan jerked about to the extent of his bonds. Instantly the hand darted back, and a moment later the horse galloped away.

Maughan stared out into the black shadows of night and remembered that there were wolves, huge timber wolves in the Cypress Hills. And he was powerless to resist them.

CHAPTER XXI

JULIA MAKES A RESCUE

JULIA KINGSLEY, returning to the ranch house from the last glimpse of Maughan's waving hand over the crest of the rise, was deeply thoughtful. She softly entered the living room, stifled once more with the overhanging sadness of the bereaved home. With not a man about the house, not a sound from outdoors, with the crushing sun beating down on the baked land, she was more sensitive than ever to the grief of the mother who spent her days in brooding.

Her eyes fell directly on Mrs. Wampole crouched over the front window sill, holding to her lips the sleeve of an old waterproof of Archie's that hung on a nail behind her.

With a gush of guilt and shame Julia remembered that only a few minutes before she had sought an excuse to get away from this, to dishonour a mother's sorrow—she had been thrusting forward her own petty desires against this real suffering. How deep was her own grief? If Archie were—dead—— She flushed with humiliation that her feelings were so unsteady, so shot with other thoughts, so untrue to the man she had promised to marry. Tears gushed to her eyes.

"My boy," moaned the mother. "My darling, lost boy!"

Julia swept across the room with streaming eyes and threw herself at the older woman's feet, sinking her face in the spotless apron and sobbing hysterically. At that moment she felt almost suicidally sad, struck to the heart by the vision of what she had lost, pained, too, by the memory of her moments of unfaithfulness. Mrs. Wampole bent over the young head.

"We've lost him, my dear, you and I. Only a mother and a—a wife can know how terrible our loss is."

She lifted Julia's streaming eyes and looked jealously into them.

"I'm almost glad you weren't married—it makes my grief so much more my own, just my own. There was no one, no one, to love him like his mother. I was his mother. I've always loved him. You were——" She stooped with a flush and kissed the wet young cheeks tenderly. "That's wrong of me, dear, cruel. You would soon have been his wife. You would have had the right then—— No one—not even his mother—would have told me I didn't know and love Bob best."

"But Archie will come back, Mrs. Wampole, he'll come back."

The older woman started and dropped the uplifted chin, a repelling chill seemed to sweep over her. This young thing, who was only promised to her son, who had known him only a couple of years, and then only as a lover—she was thinking to ridicule the depth of a mother's outward suffering to rob her of the exquisiteness of her sorrow.

"You aren't his mother, Julia," she chided. . . . "I sit here day by day and think and think. And I know . . . he won't return. Day by day my grief grows—that is how I know." The old voice broke again. "He was still so much of a child, the simple, irresponsible boy . . . my little lad. He used to come running in from the range, all spurred and sun-burnt and strong,

and gather me in his arms and laugh into my neck and tickle me here—just here——”

“Don’t mother, oh don’t,” sobbed the girl.

“Why? Why shouldn’t I remember his living ways, now he’s gone?”

She had chilled again, her body stiffening away from the figure that bent at her knees.

“I can’t stand it, oh, I can’t stand it.”

“And what about me—his mother?”

Julia picked herself up slowly and went to the doorway, where she stood outlined against the brightness of the outer world. The older woman’s eyes followed her almost jealously, a tinge of wonder in her face. The girl in the doorway heaved a long fluttering sigh.

“Is Mr. Wampole coming back to lunch?” she asked, in a lifeless tone.

“I don’t expect him.”

That day’s time of misery was ended.

They lunched by themselves, and after she had assisted the girl with the dishes and tidied the front room, Julia retired to her own room. Mrs. Wampole had wrapped herself with her sorrow in her bedroom.

All through the long afternoon Julia sat before the back window overlooking the corrals and the end of the valley. From where she sat she could just see above the ridge the dark line of the tree-tops of the Cypress Hills, and except for an hour’s mending she never lost sight of them. . . . The chiming of the clock in the living-room startled her and she counted it incredulously. Seven o’clock! She could hear the girl moving about the kitchen, but Mrs. Wampole had certainly not left her room. Julia stood up and looked away toward the Hills.

Then with a sudden little rush she pinned on her head a small Stetson, examined herself instinctively in the mirror, and went to knock on Mrs. Wampole’s door.

“Coming, dear,” called the latter. “I’d lost track of time. I hope Hedel (the maid) hasn’t forgotten too.”

"I'm going for a ride," Julia cried through the panels. "Don't wait dinner for me."

Without awaiting a reply she ran down the stairs and out to the kitchen. After a hasty glance to see that Hedel had dinner well under way, she made for the stables. There was not a man about the place except Sing, and she was forced to saddle Ginger herself, a not unusual preface to a ride. But this time Ginger persisted in evading her, so that at last she was forced to rope him.

When she had him bridled her fingers fumbled with the saddle in her haste, and Ginger curvetted away from her, and she cut him smartly with the quirt, which so surprised him that he stood trembling until she was in the saddle.

Mrs. Wampole called to her as she passed the house, but she kept on up the trail as if she had not heard. On the prairie the wind sang past her ears and puffed out her waist, and she felt her spirits rise. Some of the tension also seemed to ease. So that after a fast gallop for a couple of miles she drew up to wonder at herself.

She was making straight for Elk Lake, though Elk Lake had never been consciously in her mind at any time. What had been in her mind? She did not know—definitely. Merely an urge to get on her horse and get away toward Cypress Hills, an insistent call she could not ignore. They looked dark and gloomy ahead of her already, though she was riding in a beautiful late afternoon that seemed to have lost only some of its heat but none of its brightness. The verdant heights fascinated her, yet she shuddered, a hypnotic effect she knew she dare not pause to reason with.

At the edge of the lake she turned directly in among the trees. There was no hesitation, no stopping to consider or reflect. Even as she thrilled with a nameless fear she rode steadily on, dropping into a draw and riding forward along an indefinite clearing that advanced into the depths of the Hills.

The shadows of evening closed round her almost with the first of the trees and she peered nervously from side

to side, her hand shaking and her heart beating so that she imagined she could hear it. With teeth set she urged the reluctant Ginger forward, talking to him in a low voice and comforted herself somewhat by the sound of it.

But nothing could lessen her terror, a substantial thing that defied reason and warned her not to attempt it. To examine it at all would only give it more compelling shape.

Then she imagined she knew what it was. Through the vast silence of the darkness that lay about her rang the hideous howl of the timber wolf. Ginger leaped madly at it, but she brought him down with relentless hand, and with gulping throat continued her course. Again came the howl, a long, quavering, hungry cry that thrilled every vein of her. Off in another direction broke other howls, answering, gloating. The wolves were closing in. Then Ginger jerked himself to a standstill with braced feet, his whole body trembling, ears pricking forward.

She was not surprised at her horse's terror. Another sound beat above the note of the hideous howls—weirder, more hunting, incongruous, like a man eating peanuts on a battle field. Straight ahead of her someone was singing—a man—singing a silly, music-hall ballad she had heard in London two years before. Her mind bounded off at a tangent to the Coliseum—packed with applauding spectators—a chubby little ingénue with fluffy skirts and an aggressive innocence that was her stock in trade—and a shrieking song that brought the house to its feet. With a dash of her spurred heels she drove Ginger ahead.

As the horse's hoofs clanged on the rock, the singing faltered a moment, then went on. She threw herself from the saddle.

From behind a tree came Maughan's voice, jeering:

"Shoot again, you——, and be damned to you! Only this time you won't frighten me. I pulled your leg, you devil! You were so easy for the tenderfoot." He laughed tauntingly. "There's a place behind the ear—— Nobody will

know who did it. You're quite safe. Nobody'll ever find me here."

Julia fell on her knees at his side. In the middle of a horrible oath he stared at her through the dim light, blinking his eyes.

"Ah!" was all he said. But a note in it made Julia's face go deep crimson in the kindly darkness.

"Why—Mr. Maughan!"

"Yes—funny place for me to be, isn't it. Sorry you caught me practising my latest Western diversion, Miss Kingsley. I was trying out a new vocabulary. I thought it was someone else."

"What has happened? Who did this?" She was struggling frantically with the rope.

"If you wish to free me, Miss Kingsley, you'll find a knife in my right-hand pocket."

She found the knife and slashed at the rope, sawing with mad haste but weak hand. With a surge he burst the last few strands and threw his freed arms about her and drew her close to his face.

"Ah!" he said again. "You came. I brought you." A wild laugh rippled off into the ugly blackness of the Hills. His arms opened suddenly and released her. "Sorry," he stammered, and rose stiffly to his feet.

She was grateful for the darkness, grateful for the hundred other things that crowded them in.

"But who tied you? In a few minutes—the wolves—oh-h!"

She buried her face in her hands and a solitary sob broke through her fingers. For a moment there was intense silence.

"I saw nothing," he said, speaking quickly. "I only heard. I also heard the wolves. Beastly howl they have, isn't it? But I guess they thought the row I was raising just as beastly. If there's one thing I can't do it's sing. And mother spent quite a bit of money on a singing teacher for me—that was when she didn't know me as well as she did after I'd practised a year or two. And now——"

Her horse whinnied, and another answered from near by.

"That's Mascot."

They found Mascot tied to a tree, and he mounted in silence and together they rode back toward the prairie.

"But you've told me nothing—nothing, Mr. Maughan," she complained.

"Miss Kingsley, I fell from my horse. Simply that. Here's a wound on my forehead to prove it. You found me lying there in the darkness, dazed. That's all."

She rode on for several minutes.

"It's not all, Mr. Maughan, but I'm going to take you on trust—for a while."

"It's more than I could expect," he replied gratefully. "I promise you you'll never regret it."

From far back the trail they had come broke the sudden beat of a galloping horse. They pulled up, Maughan's hand on hers. The sound was receding into the darkness of the Hills, and presently it ceased.

Maughan threw back his head with a jeering laugh.

"What a flat ending! Nothing has happened. I'm here as well as ever—and happier. Even the wolves are fooled. I could write a better story."

They rode out from the trees and pushed their mounts swiftly into the clear night of the prairie. A million stars dotted the sparkling black bowl over their heads. The gentle prairie breeze wafted in their faces, chill with night but gloriously welcome. A pack of coyotes, more hideous in their cries than even the timber-wolf, ki-yip-i-i-ipped along far beyond the lake.

Julia Kingsley and Maughan lifted their faces to the night breeze and laughed.

CHAPTER XXII

THE SERGEANT MAKES A DISCOVERY

AN hour after Julia rode away toward the Cypress Hills Sergeant Prior appeared at the ranch to take charge of the Police quest for the missing year-olds. He was hollow-eyed from overwork and long hours on duty, but directly from a long ride eastward to assist in a prairie fire fight he had come across to the Double LF as soon as he had got in touch with Inspector Barker by telephone from the police post at Medicine Lodge. For thirty hours he had scarcely been off his feet, and in the last three days a dozen hours of sleep had sufficed him. It was all in the day's work of a Mounted Policeman.

The men of the Double LF were riding to the very last hour of daylight in search of the cattle, and they had not yet returned when Prior rode up. He received what additions to the story Mrs. Wampole knew, and spent some time about the stables and the corrals. He even had a talk with Sing. At dark Wampole came in with two cowboys, and shortly afterwards Texas and the others straggled up. Boss, foreman, and Policeman retired to the living room to discuss the rustling.

Since the earliest loss—more than a week before—not a trace had been discovered, and the addition of the last half-dozen added a mystery which was increased by the fact that not another ranch had suffered. Prior himself had ridden the rounds of the neighbouring ranges a week before, and thereafter the Police seemed to have done nothing. Indeed, Prior laughingly maintained that the cowboys could not be certain when a head or two disappeared from the herds, though their detailed descriptions of the missing cattle seemed to contradict him. Then, he contended, it must be merely a case of straying.

But with the latest loss he was forced to accept the rustling theory.

What puzzled them most was the size of the groups that disappeared—too large to be the slinking work of a dishonest cowboy or rancher, too small to be rustling as they knew it among professional rustlers. And the rapidity with which one loss succeeded another was new to their experience. It pointed either to a well-organized gang working on new lines, or to a readier market than usual. Only the Sergeant said little. He listened to Texas and Wampole following theory by theory, contenting himself with smoking the cigarettes Wampole kept urging on him.

In her motherly way, Mrs. Wampole had left a light in the window looking up the trail, and from time to time she opened the screen door and listened into the still night.

It was on one of these excursions that she heard Julia and Maughan returning. They came slowly down the incline, their horses tugging noisily at the reins for the rest and feed ahead. Maughan's voice dropped to the ranch house in a gentle murmur; once Julia laughed, and checked herself.

Through the window Maughan saw the khaki uniform of the Sergeant. Laying his hand on Julia's arm he whispered:

"Remember you found me thrown. That's all."

The blood congealed about the slight wound on Maughan's forehead set the room buzzing. Without waiting for a word of explanation, Mrs. Wampole hastened for hot water and bandages. Tex and Old Man Wampole exclaimed their curiosity. Sergeant Prior sat smoking in silence.

Maughan gave them the story that was to be told, while Julia retired to her room. Sergeant Prior extinguished the cigarette and sought his pipe. Thereafter he listened and watched. Maughan felt uncomfortable. At the end the Sergeant tapped his pipe empty and thrust it into his pocket.

"Hm-m! In the Hills, you say. How did you come to be in there?"

Maughan bent his head to Mrs. Wampole's ministrations.

"Beastly place to be when a horse is bucking. But I had no idea that Mascot would get nasty, or I wouldn't have risked going where the falling was hard. But I hate the prairie. It's getting to overpower me——"

"I'm surprised you signed on for a month when you hate the prairie so," remarked Prior carelessly.

"You wouldn't if you knew why I did it."

"Perhaps I do know."

"Did the Inspector tell you I was penniless? It was either the Double LF or a dustman's job in town."

Prior pulled his long legs under him and slouched to his feet.

"Guess I'll be moving along. I'll be round first thing in the morning."

He went out to the stables for his horse. He could have saddled a dozen horses by the time he returned, riding up the trail toward the house. He dismounted before the door and spoke through the screen:

"Lost your rope, eh?"

Maughan felt his heart jump.

"Dropped it away back, I suppose. My wits weren't any too keen after the bump I got, I guess."

"Oh, your wits are keen enough most of the time." The Sergeant opened the screen door and continued pointedly: "By the way, you didn't see any fresh tracks of cattle in there, I suppose?"

"I wouldn't notice them—unless it was in mud. I didn't see any mud. I only remember the rock I fell on."

"Ah! Pleasant riding in the Hills in the dark. You're much too modest, Maughan, about not noticing things. I think you can be trusted to see most things."

"Thanks!" replied Maughan brightly, helping himself to a second dish of canned pears. "You can thank Texas for all I know that's worth while in this country."

The Sergeant threw back his head in a short laugh.

"Blame it on the dog," he said.

He leaped into the saddle and trotted up the slope, leaving an uncomfortable silence behind him. . . .

Next morning Maughan, emerging from the cook-house with a heavy pan of greasy water, almost ran into Julia. He grinned a greeting.

"I'm breaking Sing in to the real work, while I do the easy jobs like washing the dishes and scrubbing the floors and emptying the slops. I've always thought those Chinamen do things too much in bulk. 'Mass production' I think you call it. Now I'm sure of it. I'm giving an individual touch to the nicer details—such as this."

"You handle the slops beautifully, Mr. Maughan. You do a number of things well for a tenderfoot."

"Thank you, Miss Kingsley. So nice of you. If you don't mind—this is a bit heavy for untrained muscles. I'll dispose of it in the usual way, if I may."

He went to the corner and tossed away the water with a large movement.

"Art even in that, don't you think?"

She did not reply, did not even smile. She was looking through him, and he felt conscious as usual when she turned her eyes on him like that.

"I'm getting Claire out," she said. "I'm going to stay to the end of my holidays."

He toyed with the pan, answering nothing, but thinking a lot.

"Everyone else is so busy," she went on.

"I don't think Sing can spare me. I've made myself invaluable." He was looking over her head, the faintest twist of a smile on his lips. "Besides, I'm not yet boss of the Double LF."

"I was hoping you'd at least offer to go."

Claire Kingsley alone on a thirty-mile drive! He shuddered at the thought of it. And certainly she would be in the way at the ranch.

"I don't think I'm to be trusted with those raving bronchos; they get me so excited I'd be sure to pull a raw one somehow."

"I think you've exhausted the list—except that you don't wish to bring her. I'll trust you to do it safely."

"You're more trusting than Sergeant Prior."

She gave whispered voice to the excitement she was holding back:

"How much does he suspect?"

"Not more than you do, Miss Kingsley."

"But I—I do trust you, even though I know much more happened than you're willing to tell."

"I wish you could inoculate the Sergeant to that."

"If the Mounted Police get really suspicious of you, Mr. Maughan——"

"They have been from the first. I think they had it so bad the very first day I talked with the Inspector that the feeling can't be cumulative. They suspect everything I do. They're thinking a long list of things about me, I'm afraid . . . most of them untrue."

She met his light laugh with a frown.

"Mr. Maughan, are you trying to mystify me further—just that?"

"Perhaps. Where there's mystery there's interest."

Her frown deepened, and she turned as if to go. On the edge of the valley above them Sergeant Prior appeared. He saw them and trotted directly to them.

"May I speak to you, Maughan?"

Julia could not restrain a quick look of alarm as she turned away. Prior stood beside his horse without saying a word until she had passed through the kitchen door, then from behind his own lariat on the horn of the saddle he lifted two ends of new rope and held them out to Maughan. His eyes looked grim.

Maughan took the rope in his hand without looking at it.

"Sergeant, you're a wonder!" he said with real admiration. "Last night you'd been on duty three days without

rest. This morning I find you've been spending most of the night and morning in the Cypress Hills. You must be made of steel."

"A rather profitable night and morning, don't you say so?"

"Of course," Maughan agreed. "You know I lied last night—knew it at the time. My fatal defect is an inability to lie convincingly; it has hounded me all my life."

"Cut the chatter. You've got a lot more important things to say than that, and I'm listening."

"You're wrong, Sergeant. It's the first mistake you've made in the case. I'm finished." His lips closed with a snap.

"Do you mean that you refuse to say anything more, to explain—that rope?"

"The story of my adventure in the Cypress Hills is a private matter of my own."

The Policeman's eyes flashed.

"Better think again. We've ways of making that an unfortunate attitude to adopt toward the Mounted Police."

"But you haven't a way of making me speak when I don't want to. I don't question your authority—you might even arrest me, but it would be such a breach of common sense and have so many distressing results to all of us, that I don't believe you'll do it."

The Sergeant hesitated. Maughan was speaking with such frankness, yet with such quiet determination.

"If you arrest me," he was going on, "you must either think me in some way mixed up in the rustling—and against that I have a host of alibis—or you admit it's because you resent what seems defiance. I assure you that it's not defiance. You see, you're robbed of the old stand-by of vagrancy as an excuse for putting me behind the bars." He held out the greasy dishpan. "I'm drawing twenty-five good dollars a month for doing things like this, and the money's in my pocket. Indeed, I might pose as a gentleman of leisure."

He drew from his pocket a great roll of bills and held it beneath the Sergeant's surprised eyes.

"Not bad for twenty-five dollars and forty cents as a nest egg only three days ago? There's something more than a hundred and eighty dollars there, which isn't bad for half a week, even for the West. . . . It means more mystery for you, but I don't want to sail under false colours with the Police—and I know how you revel in mysteries." He turned frank eyes on the Sergeant's scowling face. "If it'll set you at ease, I'll promise to call on the Inspector the first time I'm in town. And the prospects of my starting soon are enormously bright. Miss Kingsley wishes it, and what she wishes usually comes off. In the meantime I'm not likely to skip out. I'm playing much too big a game for that."

CHAPTER XXIII

INSPECTOR BARKER ASKS

BUT Old Man Wampole stood out surprisingly against Julia's solicitude for her sister. The stolen cattle were worrying him out of his usual line of thought, and Julia herself hesitated to persist amid the anxiety that hung over the ranch. It was two days, therefore, before Maughan was seated in the buckboard alone behind the indefatigable little bronchos on his way to Medicine Hat.

During those two days Texas had found time to give him some lessons in riding mildly bucking horses, and Maughan had developed a craving for learning to shoot that would not be satisfied. Many a gopher and coyote was annoyed at his persistence, though there were no fatalities among such difficult marks. Texas pretended, however, to see the earmarks of an apt pupil.

Of Julia he saw little. Each day she wandered down to the cookhouse, to Sing's grinning delight, and engaged

Maughan in trifling conversation that left his face less solemn when she had gone. One evening he spent in the living-room of the ranch house, though how he came to attain to that he never rightly understood. He did know that they kept him at the piano most of the evening, and he had no chance to speak to Julia. From before the bunkhouse he could hear his companions applauding.

Of that trip to Medicine Hat Maughan had many misgivings, the least of which was the rushing bronchos. He was thinking most of Claire Kingsley's languishing eyes, and of the promise to call on Inspector Barker. Also, he did not anticipate meeting Corfield and Caligni.

As he planned to make the return trip in one day, he started early and drove straight to Mrs. Cowle's to prepare Claire for the afternoon. A stop in town of three or four hours and the bronchos would be ready for the drive home. They had more than once turned back on the thirty-mile drive without even being unhitched. Putting the horses up at the livery stable, he sought the Police barracks.

The Inspector happened to be temporarily engaged in court, sitting with a local fellow-magistrate on several small cases. Maughan waited in an adjoining room for half an hour and was then admitted. The Inspector received him coldly, mumbled a word or two, and pointed to a chair. Then he opened a drawer and tossed on the blotter before him the two ends of Maughan's rope.

Maughan was none too sure of his position. Arrest would spoil all his plans, yet he was determined not to tell what the Police wished to know. The old national feeling of defiance, of insisting on his rights, had largely passed with his knowledge of the ways and powers of the Mounted Police. These ways were apt to be intensely irritating to a self-respecting Englishman, but that was not likely to weigh with the Police, and he had much to gain by keeping friendly with them.

A grim smile played over the Inspector's face as he picked up the rope and examined it.

"Cut," he said, "and by an unsteady hand . . . a weak wrist, I should say. And the last few strands broken."

"I might insist that, after the fall on the head, I was naturally a little unsteady——"

"That wouldn't help much——"

"I was going to say, Inspector, that I might insist so many foolish things, but I don't intend to."

"You do well," observed the Inspector. "You know how badly you lie, I believe—sometimes. You have enough sense to realize that I know that rope was cut by Miss Kingsley—and at the last you burst free."

Maughan smiled whimsically. "One has to be a Mounted Policeman to think of all the little lies. The fact that I don't lie well should be a point in my favour."

"Hm—m! You can stand a few points in your favour as far as the Police are concerned. I detect considerable effort at evasion, and in matters that concern the Police. We make a lot of allowance for your inexperience in Western ways, but there's a limit. Now, what's the true story of that rope? "

Maughan reflected a long while. He knew how little he was deceiving the Mounted Police, yet they could be certain of nothing material unless he spoke . . . and to establish their doubt or provide them with the story as he knew parts of it—and surmised the rest—would assuredly overthrow all his plans.

"Are you going to speak, Mr. Maughan . . . or must we extort it from Miss Kingsley? "

Maughan jerked his head up and glared.

"I take you for a gentleman, Inspector Barker."

"It makes small difference to me what you take me for. I'm first of all an official of the Royal North-West Mounted Police—and that just about covers my code. . . . You think you might be breaking new ground, that you might be giving us information which we have no means of getting in other ways. Relieve yourself of that idea. We know a lot we're not talking about—a lot you might be interested in yourself. . . . To

give you a start on the story, let me tell you what we read from that rope. You were tied to a tree after really being thrown from your horse. We know the tree, we know the spot where your head struck the rock. . . . But what made the horse buck—and what happened after you were thrown? . . . There are several more things to be traced in that locality, I believe, but not what I'm asking you."

Then the Inspector made a mistake. Had he stopped there the whole story as Maughan knew it might have become Police property. The essentials seemed already in their possession, and the fear hung over him that they would subject Julia Kingsley to an examination which would only heighten their interest and force her into a compromising position with regard to himself. He realized keenly how ill-advised had been a scheme of silence that included an innocent girl.

But the Inspector did not stop there. He was growing impatient at Maughan's continued silence.

"I don't want to arrest you, Maughan," he went on, not unkindly. "I don't believe you're deliberately engaged in anything that brings you within the law. Indeed, I know pretty well what you have in mind. . . . And I'm inclined to warn you that you're barking up the wrong tree. You haven't enough time to waste so much of it. I won't say any more—I shouldn't have said so much—but you're a tenderfoot, and I know how much you're interested in certain incidents that have seemed to dog your steps. There are, however, so many side-issues to the thing you're working on, and you're apt to lose track of them and let them lead you astray. . . . It seems to me you should be influenced strongly by a picture of what might happen to a man tied to a tree by night in the heart of the Cypress Hills."

Maughan felt a strong inclination to take the kindly Inspector into some part of his confidence at least.

"In reality there was little danger. I found that out before we reached the prairie."

The lines on the Inspector's forehead deepened; he frowned impatiently on Maughan.

"What are you hiding from us?" he demanded.

"I'm a theorist," Maughan replied. "A stumbling, faltering, fallible speculator. It's not a new game to me, I admit. I may be making every mistake with which you charge me. But if I am, the penalty will be on my own head alone. But if I win"—the long, grave face broke into a smile—"ah, that will reward me for every risk I run. There's a world of brilliant promise somewhere back of the cloud through which I'm struggling. The promise alone is worth the struggle. If I break through—ah, Inspector!"

The Inspector dropped the rope back in the drawer and wheeled his chair to face Maughan.

"Is five thousand dollars worth so much as that, Maughan?"

"No-o. I can't say it is, though it's something that helps to the greater reward."

The cold grey eyes of the Inspector bored into him as a slow smile broke over the lined face.

"Confining myself to the five thousand, Maughan, I doubt if you're intended to get it."

"Who is in the scheme to defeat me, may I ask?"

"That you'll discover in due time . . . and I don't see how we can help you—even if we wished. . . . Aren't there several details of events that make you wonder—and doubt yourself?"

"Oh, several. For instance, Caligni is graciously permitted to go on cutting hair at twenty cents a cut. And Corfield—— You've apparently accepted the theory that Old Man Wampole——"

"I'm not discussing theories with an outsider. But what has Corfield to do with it?"

"That's what I'm going to find out . . . if the Police don't interfere."

"We haven't interfered much, have we? Indeed, we've collected more than a little disrepute because we're interfering so little. If you're going to find out anything about

Dan Corfield. . . . Well, we're not going to queer the pitch. However—you've seen Corfield exactly once since you came to Medicine Hat."

"That's once the Mounted Police have fallen down. I've seen him twice, and the second experience was not only more extended but infinitely more interesting to the Police and myself than the visit you know of. Really, Inspector, you're making your men lose a lot of time on me."

The Policeman's teeth snapped shut.

"The impression grows on me with the days that no time that's spent on you is wasted—you fake tender-foot. I've taken pains to verify some of your sub-division story, but you'd better understand now that I'm accepting nothing on hearsay. We've been keeping an eye on you—and I can see no reason for taking it off. I'm not going to arrest you . . . but remember the rope the calf hanged itself with. . . . The Mounted Police attend all executions in this country."

CHAPTER XXIV

A MATTER OF FORTY LOTS

IT required only a day or two to convince Maughan that his instinctive objection to Claire Kingsley's presence at the Double LF was well founded. It was not that she was ever apt to make herself personally objectionable to the male. Despite the wearying persistence of her coquetry, she had a good working knowledge of men, and it was quickly brought home to her that drooping eyes and hanging head were lost on the Englishman. Her inexperience fought the revelation at first, but finally she accepted it, with only isolated lapses due to habit and a faint measure of vanishing hope.

Indeed, Claire made herself most popular about the ranch. She was jolly, free-and-easy, not above making eyes at flattered cowpunchers, and her sympathy was a crying thing. In a hundred little ways she made herself

useful, her training in a good hospital having fitted her to cope with a thousand emergencies not intimately connected with her profession. She cooked well and gladly, she played the piano and sang, she even sang to the cowboys' mouth-organs and concertinas and violins; always she seemed to be on hand for the many small tasks that crop up about a ranch and are neglected by those most intimately concerned. It gave her so much better chance than Julia that she was bound by no convention of grief, of personal concern in the shadow that overhung the ranch.

Her sympathy was cosmopolitan and unfailing. Principally it wrapped itself round the grieving mother. To Mrs. Wampole she became much more the sorrowing daughter than was Julia. Gay she was when the occasion offered, and when Mrs. Wampole was absent; but in the older woman's presence she was a black-draped figure of grief and sympathy. It was the evident sincerity of it that relieved her grief of any charge of hypocrisy. Maughan more than once came on the two women sitting alone in the living-room, hands clasped, saying nothing, while Julia bustled about at the work that was being neglected in this selfish submission to their feelings.

Obviously Julia was trying to fill her time with household duties, as if she did not wish to think. And Claire was left more and more to feed the devouring flames of the mother's sorrow. Her coming added only another cloud to the home, and Maughan watched with grinding teeth the long, gloomy face of Julia as she moved about her self-imposed tasks.

Another irritation was the obstacle Claire's presence put in the way of seeing Julia alone. She never came now to the cook-house, never dropped casually in his way as she had been wont to, never recognized him beyond his position as a favoured member of the outfit with special education and training that entitled him to a more intimate ranch-house acquaintance. On the few occasions when he managed to get her to herself

she seemed self-conscious and uncomfortable, and he ceased to work for them.

Of one thing Maughan convinced himself—that Old Man Wampole was no party to his son's disappearance. In the ranch house he was wont to stand within the screen door, staring off up the trail, saying nothing, his lips puckering and loosening. At other times he would burst into a violent denunciation of the Mounted Police, soothed only by his wife's gentle reprimand or Claire's too flagrant sympathy.

In such an atmosphere Julia wilted from day to day, and Maughan began to be consumed with a fever for doing something, to hasten his undeveloped plans to a point where action was possible, if not promising.

One day, seeing Julia start away over the prairie on Ginger, he dropped the task at which Sing had set him and threw saddle on Mascot. By the time he reached the edge of the rise Julia was galloping toward the Hills, but under spur Mascot quickly cut down her lead. She heard the beat of hoofs behind her and slowed down until he reached her side. For several minutes they rode in silence.

"Miss Kingsley," he inquired suddenly, "are you going to spend all you summer holiday out here?"

She nodded without looking at him.

"Then I want to say that it's a mistake, a horrible calamity. It's no holiday for you. You can't stand it."

"I must stand it—until they find what's become of Archie."

"Will you be contented then—whatever they find?"

She swung in the saddle and faced him.

"Just what do you mean, Mr. Maughan?"

"Suppose—imagine anything that might happen." He leaned forward and patted Mascot's neck to cover the hint.

"You mean—suppose—the worst had happened to him?" She did not wait for his reply. "Oh, anything would be better than this uncertainty."

After a long pause he continued:

"I'm trying to find him, Miss Kingsley, and I need a lot of help. If you would only tell me—what you suspect."

"That is the second time you have hinted at that."

"Well, you see, I knew so little. . . . But I wonder if you knew he was in debt in town, rather deeply in debt."

She jerked Ginger about and glared at him over her horse's head.

"Let me tell you, Mr. Maughan, that Archie Wampole was the soul of honour—a gentleman. He would never evade a debt. You question it because—because he lost his temper with you once. Surely you understand why!" She shifted the battery of her eyes from him and urged her mount forward. "He was jealous. I was scarcely fair that day to anyone—to Archie, or to you, or to Claire . . . or to myself. I had no thought of hurting him." A mist was in her eyes.

"Do you suspect that he—he—that you hurt him so badly that——"

"No, Archie was too manly to do that."

"Then, do you suggest that he has fled because of jealousy—a temporary irritation like that?"

"Archie has not fled," she replied stubbornly. "He would not leave like that without—without telling me. I mean he would not leave me to think he might be dead because—— Don't you see that it leaves me practically a widow?"

"And more and more you're considering yourself a widow," he observed bitterly.

"I'm accepted as that locally; why should I endanger my reputation and shock every decent soul by denying it, even if I could and wish to. . . . I'm not like a girl who wished to be free. I have no reason for wishing to be free."

He frowned at the trail ahead of them.

"And so you decide to immolate yourself to local feeling, to welter amid the grief of a fond mother who will never forget. Why, even your sister——"

"What has Claire to do with it?" she demanded sharply. Then her voice softened. "Claire is very sympathetic."

"I know I'm exceeding all bounds," he persisted, "but I must take the chance. When school opens next month you'll be in no condition to start a long year of teaching. As your friend, Miss Kingsley, may I beg of you to go East for the rest of the time?"

"Why do you wish to get rid of me? What is turning over in that mysterious mind of yours?"

"That is scarcely fair. I do not wish to get rid of you—far from it. I mean nothing beyond what I said. I am thinking only of your health. So far as I'm personally concerned——"

She struck Ginger sharply and they galloped on. After a time she spoke:

"I can't go East, Mr. Maughan."

"Why?"

"I can't afford it. I haven't the price of the railway ticket." She laughed bitterly. "Every dollar I saved has gone into buying lots. I had the fever. Like everyone else in Medicine Hat I was going to be a millionaire in a year. As you see me now I haven't fifty dollars in cash to my name—but I'm the disillusioned possessor of forty valueless lots in the Corfield Subdivision. And until someone who's a bigger fool than I comes along and buys me out, I'll continue the owner."

"The Corfield—Subdivision!" Maughan remembered the blue print of it on Corfield's wall—it lay immediately west of the Garrison. "Did Corfield sell them to you?"

He spoke through closed teeth, his face working.

"He didn't *make* me buy. You misunderstand. I should have had sense enough to know they never would have anything but a speculative value."

"How much did you pay for them?"

"Eight hundred dollars."

His quirt came down mercilessly on Mascot's flank, so that the horse hunched her back as if she would buck. He brought her under with brutal hand and quirt.

"Oh, I know all about it," she laughed. "One could buy several Subdivisions out there now at ten dollars an acre, cash."

"Miss Kingsley, will you sell to me at what you paid? I believe I can make money out of it. I couldn't give you cash, but here's a hundred and fifty you might have."

"So that I might go East?" She forced a laugh. "I'm not likely to escape a bad bargain by unburdening myself on my friend. And if you'll take my advice, Mr. Maughan—and I know the game a little by this time—you'll stay strictly out of real estate in Medicine Hat till things brighten. This summer nothing is selling. And these lots are three miles out."

"There are rumours, you know, that the C.P.R. has in plan a high-level bridge——"

Her sudden laugh rang out. "These rumours have been out ever since the land up there was put on the market. It's the men who start these rumours who corner the profit from them."

"Let's you and I start one," he grinned. "Anyway, if I'm prepared to take the risk——"

"I'm not."

"And that's too bad, because I'm already a land-owner in Medicine Hat, and I'd planned to get a little more. . . . For I'm going to make money out of it."

She groaned. "So that's why you're poor? Why, oh, why don't newcomers consult someone they can trust before they buy?"

"Corfield says——"

"Corfield? Oh, dear, you're impossible, Mr. Maughan. I bought from Dan Corfield, and now I wish I hadn't. There's no imagination like a real estate man's. And it's his business to pass it on to his client. Well, we're comrades in distress. It has cost me a holiday. I imagine it's cost you a lot more. Let's forget it. I can get along without ever seeing the effete East. Once in the West, you know. . . ."

"I believe you," he replied, in his sober way.

CHAPTER XXV

MAUGHAN TAKES A HOLIDAY

MAUGHAN welcomed with eagerness the end of his first month at the Double LF. It left him free to undertake something he had in mind, for he could no longer endure inaction.

He surprised Old Man Wampole by announcing that he would take a week's holiday. The old man grumbled, but he was accustomed to the ways of cowpunchers and this was not the busy season. Mrs. Wampole, who had been growing fonder of the new hand, shook her head sadly. She, too, knew something of the holiday dissipations of cowboys; many a one had returned to the Double LF with empty pockets, head buzzing, eyes heavy.

Julia contented herself with studying Maughan's face.

"May be gone ten days," he said, "but I'll be back—if you want me."

"Sure we want you," declared the old man. "And, of course, you'll need money. Here's next month's——"

Maughan held up his hand.

"No, no advances, please. I told you I'm not working another month for twenty-five dollars. It'll be forty. But I don't need the money. I'm going to Winnipeg, too."

"But you said you were broke, and twenty-five dollars don't——"

"Oh, I've been in town a couple of times since that. I'm in funds again."

"Then you've been borrowing—or gambling. I know of that dive under Caligni's. It's terrible to think what those places do to our young men."

"I've been once," said Maughan, "and it was my last visit. By the way, I'm borrowing Mascot."

Then he went out and did some borrowing unknown to the boss—fifty dollars from Texas.

The day and a half Maughan spent about the bars in Medicine Hat was not the most pleasant experience of his life. His favourite drinks were expensive or unobtainable, and what he was served, while appearing under innocent and reputable names, disagreed with him. At the end of the time he looked as bad as he felt and his head was performing disturbingly.

By the time he completed the dissipation all Medicine Hat knew that another cowboy was starting on a holiday to Winnipeg; the whole town was willing to drink a send-off to him at his expense. When the transcontinental pulled out eastward he knew to a dollar how expensive was such liberal entertainment—but he decided it was money well spent.

The twenty-minute climb to Dunmore Junction Maughan spent in the concealment of a lavatory, and by the time the wheels stopped turning before the lifeless station he was slipping across the tracks through the dusk.

In a small bluff just over the edge of the drop to the big valley wherein lay Medicine Hat he found Mascot—as he had left her that morning, finding his way back to town by a shunting engine. Striking out into the darkness he rode fast across country, rounding Medicine Hat to the south. About midnight he flagged the *westbound* train at Howell, twelve miles west of Medicine Hat, and climbed wearily into a berth.

Next morning he alighted in Calgary, having come almost two hundred miles west instead of six hundred east to Winnipeg, as his friends—and enemies—supposed.

Five days later he stepped from the through train at Howell station once more, got Mascot from the local merchant's stable, and rode back across the prairie around Medicine Hat to Dunmore Junction. Thus, in less than a week, grinning self-consciously, he

greeted the station loungers at Medicine Hat and sought the Provincial.

Dan Corfield was one of those who laughed at the returned cowboy and shouted a joke after him as he moved along the platform. An hour later, as the real estate man sat in his private office wondering how to fill his time so as to appear to be busy, the tousle-headed clerk in eyeglasses edged through the door and announced Maughan.

Beyond the stained mahogany counter Maughan waited, going over backwards once more the window signs and idly inventing new ones Corfield had not thought of. His wait extended until he wondered if there was a back exit by which Corfield could avoid unpleasant interviews. The clerk had not come out. Maughan was feeling less certain of himself, when the door burst open and Corfield rushed out with extended hand—the same old Corfield the Cordial. A boisterous laugh preceded him, and a wink of deep understanding. Maughan took a chance and permitted his eyelid to flutter in reply, though lack of practice made it a contortion compared with Corfield's agile lids.

"Well, well, well, well! My old friend straight from Winnipeg, late of London!" He was pawing over Maughan's shoulder as he pulled him through the opened flap. "And how are things in Winnipeg? I feel as if I'd bought your ticket for you."

"How did you know I'd been to Winnipeg?" Maughan gave a suspicious glance about the office and his tone was truculent.

"Oh, one of those darn sparrows told me. We real estate specialists keep our fingers on the pulse of things. That's how we make ourselves invaluable to our clients. Have a good cigar. How'd you find Winnipeg? Anything interesting going on up there?"

He eyed Maughan with sudden interest that quickly grew as the other's eyes dropped away.

"I know Winnipeg," he went on. "There are reasons—

and reasons for going there. Cost a bit of money, but often it pays in the little things one picks up. By the way, I've been waiting for the chance to tell you how sorry I am for that little unpleasantness that occurred the other night at Caligni's. Texas should have known better. At the same time Caligni went a bit too far—I felt like getting in on it myself when he——”

“I'd forgotten all about it,” replied Maughan indifferently. “I understand why we should have got out before daylight. Tex and I were a bit primed with Caligni's dope or we wouldn't have made such a rotten fuss. That whisky of his, in that air, got under my skin all right. It isn't you should think of apologizing, but me. Damn it, that gun might have gone off, the way I was feeling. I wish you'd explain to Caligni; I daren't look him in the face.”

Corfield laughed one of his friendliest laughs.

“Don't worry about Cal. He understands. Come round to-night and have another whirl. Cal was saying only last night: ‘That Mister Maughan,’ he said—you know his way—‘that Mister Maughan he's a bit of all right. I like to see a fellow——’”

“Good sport, Caligni,” Maughan put in delightedly. “Fine chap to have in a town like this. I'll drop round some night soon, but not to-night. Lord, I need sleep more than anything. Winnipeg certainly plays the deuce with regular hours, doesn't it?”

“That depends. I'm a Bible Class teacher myself.”

“Well, it's made me content to stick about Medicine Hat for the rest of my days. No place like this one right here under our feet. I told them that in Winnipeg; they've heard of us. Not another corner in this part of the globe——”

He was talking grandiloquently, punctuating his remarks with waving hands, pompous, noisy—but obviously speaking for effect, to cloak something that lay deeper. Corfield read it so clearly that he smiled inwardly. Maughan clambered to his feet and wandered about the room looking at the blue prints with feverish interest.

"I believe in the place, I do—believe in it so firmly that I'm prepared to put every penny I have in it. A gamble, I know, but an Englishman is a born gambler. Ah! 'Corfield Subdivision!' One of your own, eh? Must feel proud to have your name to a nice bit of ground like that. 'Maughan Subdivision'—how does it sound?"

He examined the edges of the blue print.

"Next to mine, eh? That's interesting. Own it yourself?"

He darted a covert glance at Corfield, and Corfield caught it and filed it in his mind with the other suspicious details of the interview.

"I don't own it all, but I could place my hands on it easily enough, I guess. Trust Corfield the Cordial."

"What's it worth—say, a bit there next mine—fifty or sixty lots, or maybe less?" He circled his finger indefinitely about a portion of the blue print.

"I think I know where I could get you forty lots right away, just where you're pointing, and at a special price for a friend."

"You might find out the price and let me know. I might decide to continue my holdings right out to the river there—of course, if I get the right price."

"What would you be willing to pay?"

"Eh?" Maughan faced Corfield with childish suspicion. "I didn't say I'd buy it. Just wanted to know the price in case—in case—— One never knows what might happen. Mind you, I won't be done! If I could pick up those lots at about twenty-five or thirty apiece I might consider them. . . . And while you're at it"—he was speaking with studied carelessness—"you might ask about prices all across there from the river."

He ran his finger across the large town map from the river directly toward Dunmore Junction.

"Don't bind me to buying a foot. I'm only asking prices." His face he kept averted.

Corfield rose from his chair and sidled up behind him.

"You've come to the right spot," he whispered, clapping Maughan on the back. "I won't say a word about what you found in Winnipeg. There are reasons—and reasons for going there—as I said."

Maughan showed a guilty, startled face.

"Who told you—— I've only been on a holiday to Winnipeg, I tell you. What makes you think——"

His simulated anger petered away before Corfield's significant leer, and he shook off the real estate man's hands with a petulant movement.

"I don't see why you——"

"Don't say another word, Maughan. I'm not prying—though, of course, I'd like to know—everything. You know what you know, but I can tell you it's no news to me. I warned you about it, you remember. But don't say another word unless you want to. I'll get you the figures you're after—right across there." He drew his finger slowly and meaningfully directly across the country to Dunmore Junction from the curve where the railway started down the cutbank to the town station. "Now, come over to the club and have a drink to your good fortune."

But Maughan threw up his hands and sank into a chair.

"Nothing to drink—if I'm a friend of yours, not that, Corfield. I can't look a glass in the face for a month. I've a taste on my tongue that'll defy anything but an acidulated pickle. No, sir, I'm on the water-waggon for a long, long time."

Corfield grinned his sympathy.

"I've seen the boys like that before. Never touch much myself—don't think over-indulgence is the thing for a Bible Class teacher—but I can imagine that burnt leather feeling. Still, old sport, you'll have to get used to it, a real sport like you. By the way, what's the idea in hanging about the Double LF? Going back again? Trying to work Old Man Wampole up to a deal or what? I was getting the figures——"

"Certainly get the figures. I'm only learning ranching." He winked heavily.

"So the ranch you were asking about is for yourself? I thought so—but it was none of my business. Good ranch, the Double LF. Or there's the Star H, or the Stanton Brothers'."

Maughan shook his head stubbornly.

"No, it's the Double LF for me while there's a chance. Say, what about letting me have those I.O.U.'s of the young man's? I might be able to use them as an extra lever on the old man. If I could get Caligni's too—What do yours amount to?"

Corfield considered, and after a moment got up and took a bundle of slips from the inner drawer of the safe and brought them to the desk. At a glance Maughan saw that the pile was smaller than when he saw it last, and a peculiar flash of interest came into his eyes.

"How much are they?"

Corfield made a calculation.

"Something like four hundred. And Caligni must have as many more. If you want his, let me deal with him. He's a regular sharp one if he thinks you want anything he's got. I know Cal."

"How much do you want for your own? You'll sell cheap, I suppose, seeing young Wampole's gone, and not likely to come back. Say, a couple of hundred for them."

Corfield laughed lazily.

"I'm afraid you've got the get-rich-quick germ, Maughan, and you're trying to indulge it at my expense. Those notes are worth their full price any day. When I want to push them Old Man Wampole will pay up—and be glad of the chance."

"But—but—— Why don't you collect on them then, right away, and get the money? Cash is worth something these days."

Corfield's eyes dropped to the pile of slips, and he laughed cunningly.

"Oh, of course," said Maughan, "you don't want anyone to know how you came by them."

"No one would. You didn't suppose I had my name put on them, did you?" He stopped in some confusion. "I've picked them up—everywhere. I didn't win them all over cards, not by a long shot. It was Caligni he lost to mostly. All that matters is that that's Archie's signature."

"Well. . . . I'll give you the face value . . . though I shouldn't." Maughan drew out a cheque-book and reached for the pen.

But Corfield's hand thrust him back.

"No, I've a notion to keep them."

"But if I were to pay you every cent they're worth—in cash——"

Corfield winked.

"My dear fellow, I don't mind telling you that they're worth a lot more than their face value—to me."

Maughan drew the office door gently to behind him.

"Corfield, you crooked devil!" A look of comprehension, of excitement, was on his face. . . .

When the door closed behind Maughan, Corfield threw himself back in his chair, beaming.

"You'll get your lots, my dear friend. . . . I don't think. You got to get up earlier in the morning to pull the wool over the eyes of Corfield the Correct Calculator. I know what you found out in Winnipeg."

CHAPTER XXVI

AN ENGLISH SPORT

THAT afternoon Corfield, making certain that Maughan was still in town, motored out to the Double LF, setting a record for the thirty miles of smooth trail. As soon as Maughan left his office he

had assured himself that Julia Kingsley was still on the ranch, and he was losing no time in obeying the instructions of his client—to a point that suited himself. Any suspicions he might have entertained that the two were working in collusion were dissipated by Maughan's crass innocence and the fact that he had just returned from Winnipeg after a week's absence. It was not likely, either, that Maughan, a mere cowboy on the ranch, would be in any degree of intimacy with the occupants of the ranch house.

No excuse for his visit was necessary. The doors of the ranches were always open and no questions asked. Besides, a real estate man had interests everywhere. And Corfield was a rancher himself.

When he arrived only Sing and the women were about the ranch, and Corfield intimated that he was on no special business, but would wait until Wampole returned, if he was not too long. He was just passing and thought he'd pay a call. While he waited he strolled about the place, appraising the buildings and accommodation, and the condition of the corrals, and making himself pleasant to the women.

It was two hours before he got a word in private with Julia Kingsley. . . .

When he returned to town, delighted with his success, he sought Maughan, only to find that he had not been seen since he himself left town in the early afternoon. But his horse was still in the livery stable.

Corfield spent an uncomfortable night.

In the afternoon of the next day an aggressively English Englishman lolled in a double seat on the train running south from MacLeod toward the Milk River. He wore a monocle, a tweed outing suit with very baggy knickers, spats, and a pair of golf hose that spoke for themselves. A funny little double-peaked cap was set awry on his short hair. Now and then he groaned with weariness and readjusted his position, as he stared gloomily through the car window at the rolling country through which the train was passing.

Across the aisle a humble, withered little old man kept an eye on him like a guardian and chewed surreptitiously at a wad of tobacco.

When the brakesman came through shouting "Coutts," the little old man jumped to his feet and commenced to collect the impedimenta piled about him and his temporary master—two suitcases, a waterproof travelling roll, three rifles in cases, a bundle of fishing tackle, and a camera.

The Englishman, yawning lazily, followed the guide to the platform and stood staring about him at the funny prairie town.

"I say!" he exclaimed, and that was all.

At the hotel they welcomed him with unconcealed smiles, and the last scrawl to his name was scarcely completed when a dozen curious eyes peered over his shoulder and sought one another. The Englishman shifted his head from one to another and returned their smiles, only more vacuously. Then he bethought himself and led the way to the bar, where he set 'em up all round, at the same time making inquiries about the shooting and fishing in the neighbourhood.

Next morning the stranger and the guide set out from the hotel with the rifles and the fishing tackle and the camera and drove south and east, half the population of the small village seeing them off. After a time they came in sight of a river, and the Englishman began feverishly to work at the fishing rods.

"Thar ain't nothin' thar," the old man warned him. "They said thar wasn't. We'll go on a couple of miles and pick up the main branch. Great fishing that, they said." He sniffed expertly at the air. "Sort o' smell thar ain't no fish in them waters."

But the Englishman's eyes were fixed hungrily on the river—he insisted on wetting his lines at least.

"Nevah know, bah Jove! I've pulled them out where they'd nevah been known befoh, eh—what!"

So the old man, in disgust, pulled up in a wooded valley

and proceeded to unhitch and settle down for the day. He knew these crazy English sportsmen. They'd never give in, once they'd started out for game. And while the settling was in progress the Englishman wandered away with rods and rifle and camera. By the time the old man had completed his job his boss was nowhere in sight, so he settled himself comfortably in a soft spot under a cluster of trees and promptly went to sleep.

In the meantime the Englishman had climbed the slope. Hidden by the trees, he deposited the pieces of rod and the camera under a bush, and, rifle over shoulder, struck out into the prairie toward the east.

For a long time he walked, in a swinging stride that carried him swiftly over the ground. At last he topped a rise from which he could see, in the valley stretched out below him, less than half a mile away, a large herd of cattle lazily guarded by three cowboys. The Englishman went down the slope toward them, the strings of his cap peaks, tied above his head, standing up like uncut wisps of hair protruding through a hole in the cap.

The cowboys saw him coming, read him at a glance, and prepared for fun. From there westward to the foothills of the Rockies, eager Englishmen were wont to hunt believing they were having a devil of a time if they saw only a coyote or a gopher. This one, with a fatuous but friendly smile that fairly bubbled with eager interest, greeted them while still fifty yards away.

"Bah Jove, now! Just as I jolly well pictu'ed it. I always make it a point of visiting the cinema when you cowboys are on the screen, don't you know?"

One of the cowboys, urged to do something to justify such frankness of admiration, sent his mount careering in through the herd, cut out a lively two-year-old, started it over the prairie with uplifted tail, and promptly roped it and brought it meekly back to where the Englishman watched with gaping mouth.

"So very interesting, don't you know! Bettaw than all my spoht, eh—what! I couldn't have hoped to see

it all happen before my eyes. That's what you call lassoing. Ripping spoht! Eh—ah—reminds me of what I want to awsk you. I'm looking foh game—anything to shoot at, don't you know, and I haven't seen a beah or a dee-ah yet. And not a jolly fish. And I've shot and fished everywhere, don't you know. But perhaps you chaps aren't a bally bit interested in tame things like beahs. Deah me! I trot about the world looking for spoht, and you chaps jolly well live with it all the time. So beastly interesting, don't you know, eh—what!"

The cowboys grinned down from their saddles. One of them spat a long brown stream—and even that accomplishment the Englishman watched admiringly.

"Yu'll never get much sport in this country without a horse, friend. Matter of fact, yu shouldn't ought to take chances on foot nohow with them cattle. It's plumb dangerous—don't you know, eh—what!" He consulted his companions for their approval of his mimicry.

"Yu stick near me, friend, and yu're safe, but if them cattle should take in in their noodles to look at yu—well, that ud be enough."

The stranger peered cautiously around the horse of the speaker.

"But I couldn't ride one of the bally beasts, quite sure I couldn't, don't you know."

"Course yu could. I can tell by the shape of yur legs. Here, get up and try on a nice gentle cowpony that's warranted to eat out o' yur hand." He lifted a leg over and dropped beside the Englishman. "He's so quiet I sleep in his stall and he licks my face awake at five every morning and saddles himself. Put yur foot in there."

The Englishman mounted with much quaking and gasping, gripping the horn with both hands.

"Yu mustn't do that. It's again the rules. Sit up straight. Hold yur hands up. There, yu sure look like a born cowpuncher—'cepting for the clothes."

The stranger was delighted with himself, with fear just behind the delight and crowding it closely. And

somehow the pony began to edge away toward the herd, half sideways. The man in the saddle seemed to be in a panic that increased as the distance widened between him and the laughing cowboys.

Right into the herd the pony worked its way, sinking deeper and deeper, the Englishman staring about him nervously. The owner of the horse called to him to use his heels—to pull the right rein—to do something and not sit there like a blooming lump on a log. Finally one of the mounted cow-punchers started in pursuit and after a struggle led the wide-eyed Englishman back to safety.

"Bah Jove! And I'm still on," gasped the latter. "It looked so hawd, don't you know. It's top-hole, ripping. This sure is the life—as I heard a cowboy say once. Struck me as so funny, don't you know, eh—what!"

"Yu bet yur sweet life it's the life," shouted the owner of the pony, flapping it over the rump with his sombrero.

The response was sudden and effective. The Englishman dropped the reins instantly and clutched the horn—and a moment later was peering up at them from the long grass, the monocle still in his eye.

"My word! What—what did he do to me? Such a beastly strange creature! I say, you know, he—he jumped up and down. I knew I couldn't ride one. But—aw—perhaps I might learn to in time, don't you think?"

"Oh, sure, sure! Yu stick round here for a million years or so——"

"I say, do you think I could hire a ho'se about heah? Perhaps you've some to spare on your rawnch. Are any of you the ownuh, may I awsk?"

"Sure," said the one who had lent the pony. "I own the Circle D—only Dan Corfield mightn't think so. Dan lives up in Medicine Hat, and sometimes he thinks he owns this ranch. Anyway, he collects on pay day."

"Aw—then Mr. Corfield owns it? So beastly interesting! I'm going to drop off at Medicine Hat and look the town ovuh. Interesting, they tell me. But I must go back

to my guide; he'll think I'm lost. Goodbye! Aw—thanks!"

He swayed up the slope, his baggy knickers flapping in the breeze, the rifle shifting from arm to arm and shoulder to shoulder to get it out of the way. The guide, opening one eye, beheld him as he came over the distant rise. He saw one fist clap down into the other hand—and he saw him stop and execute a few steps of a strange jig.

The old man opened both eyes, lifted his head, cursed Coutts whisky. He did not hear what the Englishman was saying to himself:

"Corfield, you damn scoundrel! And now, Claude Ambrose, the stage is almost set for the big scene."

CHAPTER XXVII

TEXAS VANISHES

TWO days later, Maughan, riding up to the Double LF with the grin of a returned prodigal, lost the grin and the affectation of self-importance in a greater event. Texas Letten had disappeared.

On the very night that started Maughan's holiday Texas had failed to return. For days the outfit had been scouring the prairie, goaded by the thought that somewhere out there, helpless and suffering, their beloved foreman was lying. The conventional accident of prairie riding—a horse stepping in a badger hole—summed up their estimate of what could have happened Texas. But day after day yielded nothing, and at last they were forced to the conclusion that something more serious and mysterious had occurred. The last anyone had seen of him was when he dived into a coulee leading towards the Cypress Hills.

Maughan, forgotten in the excitement of repeating the story, heard the last word without comment. Each

cowboy had his own details and surmises, and Maughan listened to them all with innocent interest. When he adopted the same attitude toward the stories of the ranch house occupants, the look in Julia's straight eyes warned him that he was listening too well and saying too little.

"It's certainly strange," he murmured weakly.

"Strange!" bellowed Old Man Wampole. "It's a damn sight stranger than that. There's something crooked at work against the Double LF. Archie first, then Tex, And there are those cattle. We've never lost a head till now since the Mounties cleaned up that Dutch Henry gang. . . . But they don't seem to be disturbing themselves cleaning things up now. If they don't get a hustle on I'll take a hand myself. I'm not the man to be hounded out of any country by rustlers—or whoever it is. Anybody that tries that's going to get his hands burnt." The fiery little eyes flashed. "I'm good for a fight yet, and I sure won't cave in this side of eternity. You're back just in time, Maughan; you're a cowpuncher from this on. We need every son of a gun on the ranges. Sing can do the best he can——"

"And the wages, Mr. Wampole?"

"To hell with the wages!"

"I can't afford it. I need it here. Shall we say forty?"

"Say anything you like. It doesn't mean I'll pay it."

"Forty a month, then. I'll trust Old Man Wampole."

"It's a mean advantage to take of me at such a time." The boss's eyes were twinkling.

"I warned you—and it's only a fair wage."

The old man sighed.

"All right. You're worth it, I don't mind admitting, if it's only to throw a new atmosphere over things about here. And I suppose you want it in advance, as usual. If Sing gets up on his hind legs——"

"Don't you worry about feeding the boys, Bob," his wife broke in coldly. "I guess four women can attend to that if need be."

Later in the evening Julia strolled up the ranch trail toward the edge of the valley, stood a moment looking across the prairie, and started to return. Merely a short evening stroll. Maughan, from the open doorway of the bunkhouse, saw her and decided that his own constitution demanded an outing.

As he lifted his Stetson to her half-way down to the ranch house, she plucked from the front of her waist a piece of tinted paper and handed it to Maughan without a word. It was a cheque from Corfield for eight hundred dollars. Her face was wreathed in smiles. His showed nothing but the utmost surprise. He examined the date and again drew his hand across his forehead.

"Why—why that was signed three days ago."

"Yes. Dan Corfield and I are quits. He's bought back those forty lots."

"If you'll take my advice, Miss Kingsley, you'll cash this cheque right away. I have my opinion of Corfield. Did you ask him to take the lots back?"

"I'm not likely to ask Corfield to do anything that would place me under obligation to him. I, too, have an opinion of him. He came out here in his car, nosed about for an hour or two as if to see Mr. Wampole, and incidentally—just incidentally, you understand—offered to relieve me of those lots."

"What's up, I wonder?" Maughan's brow was thoughtful.

"I neither know nor care. We can take it for granted that he's found a purchaser at a big profit. If he has——"

Suddenly she shot him one of her penetrating glances.

"Did he buy them for you?"

Maughan laughed easily.

"It's so long, Miss Kingsley, since I had eight hundred dollars in cash that I've forgotten the things it might purchase. I can assure you that I landed in Medicine Hat with less than a quarter of it. I can also assure you that I wouldn't trust Corfield with a penny. For reasons of my own any pennies that pass between us will go the

other way. I don't like him. At the moment all I possess is the boss's forty and about three dollars I had left from my holiday."

Claire emerged from the ranch house, waved to them, and started up the trail. And Maughan promptly and frankly turned Julia about and made back up the slope.

"I'm not finished," he explained. "Hang it, why can't I get a word alone with you now—I never can."

"Why should you?"

"Hm-m! Mine was a rhetorical question. Let's say yours is too. What I wanted to say was to warn you—listen, please—to warn you not to put a cent of that back in real estate, no matter what rumours you may hear. You understand no matter what rumours——"

Her half veiled eyes were drilling into him. She interrupted:

"Not so very long ago I told you that the only one who profited from rumours was the one who started them."

"I don't think I'm likely to forget a single word you say, Miss Kingsley."

Their eyes met, hers suddenly startled and a little frightened, his fixed and calm.

"May I have your assurance that you'll keep that money out of real estate?"

"Dear me! What's the new mystery?" Her head shook irritably. "You do puzzle me, Mr. Maughan—you seem to try to. I see only your clothes."

"And all the time you can see the mole on the back of my neck," he grinned. "But you haven't promised. That money is for you to go East."

"Oh-h? Then you are behind it?"

Maughan kicked himself silently.

"Every word I've told you is true. Not a cent of that eight hundred is mine. Corfield did not buy those lots for me—I never had in mind to purchase them since you refused to let me have them."

"Hadn't we better return to the house? Claire might misunderstand."

"And, of course, a misunderstanding would be awful," he said bitterly, falling into step with her down the trail.

"Yes, it would," she agreed simply.

In silence they reached the ranch house. Claire was standing before the screen door; her face flushed. But before she could speak Old Man Wampole stormed through. The grind of combining the duties of foreman and boss were telling on him—his irascible temper was not sweetened.

"There's five hundred dollars for the fellow who can find out what's happened Texas, or bring him back. I'm tired of all this underhand stuff and mystery. I'm going to get to the bottom of it if it costs me the ranch—and quick, too. To-morrow morning you get off to town, Maughan, and put an advertisement in the *Medicine Hat News*. Let it stand beside the—the other one. Somebody's going to learn they can't fool with Old Man Wampole."

"Fifty-five hundred dollars!" murmured Maughan to Julia. "Sounds good to me. I'll go out and bring Texas back."

"You've made such progress already in earning the five thousand," she returned caustically.

Next morning Maughan started for town an hour after the sun was up. He carried Wampole's advertisement of five hundred dollars for the finding of Texas Letten, and Corfield's cheque to Julia. . . . And that night there reposed in the Bank of Commerce in a new account made out to the credit of Claude Ambrose Maughan the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars.

CHAPTER XXVIII

CORFIELD ENTERTAINS STRANGERS

DAN CORFIELD, returning from the Double LF with the transfer of Julia's forty lots in an experienced pocket and a fresh blank stub in his check-book, was assailed by inexplicable doubts and

uneasiness. More vivid and uncomfortable they were because he was so unaccustomed to them. Things had run smoothly for him through a gamut of incidents and accidents that seemed to have covered the world of a real estate man's experience, and few nights had been sleepless.

But as he ran his car into the red-painted clapboard garage behind his house he was conscious of misgivings. Things were running too smoothly. When he could find Maughan nowhere his discomfort increased.

The following day the uneasiness continued, and to keep his mind off it he spent little time in the office. In the evening he set out on the nightly promenade of half the real estate men in Medicine Hat—the station platform when the transcontinentals were due.

It was a popular pastime and sometimes a profitable one, for it put them immediately in touch with the latest arrivals and enabled them to size them up from their aspect of travel experience and the condition of their baggage. Often the early stages of a deal were started before the visitor left the platform, and the chances, while the engine was being changed, of opening conversation with the gaping travellers who had all heard of Medicine Hat and its boom and its natural gas, were worth making a habit of the platform promenade.

The Calgary express whistled down the grade, creaked across the bridge, and drew up at the long plank platform. Several passengers alighted, but only two were strangers. Mystery oozed from them like odour from a rose. They were grave, aloof sort of men, experienced, self-sufficient, independent. They looked neither to the right nor to the left, but stepped down to the platform as if they knew exactly what they were planning to do and how they would do it. In their own hands they carried several strange waterproof covered cases of various shapes. Corfield, nosing about, spied the tips of a heavy tripod peering through the end of one case. The men walked rapidly down the platform to Main Street and made straight for the Provincial, seeming to wish to escape with dignity

the attentions of the small crowd that followed them. As a porter carried the heavy cases upstairs to their rooms, the crowd examined the register and waited for his return.

"Gosh!" he exploded to the rotunda in general. "Them gents must be miners or something. Heavy as lead them things were. I could feel they was iron or something."

Corfield picked his way down the fourteen steps in a thoughtful mood.

Next morning he was early at his office, having first run round to the Provincial and found that the strangers were at breakfast. He waited for them to come out, and with beating heart heard them inquire where Corfield's office was. He had time to signal the clerk not to point him out, and then he darted around to Main Street and let himself into the back room where the chairs were so comfortable and the blue-prints so alluring.

Five minutes later the two strangers entered hurriedly, almost furtively. Corfield, watching through the key-hole, saw them close the door quickly behind themselves, and while one kept his eyes on the street the other asked with unmistakable signs of nervousness if Corfield was in. The Cordial One felt like a conspirator. When the clerk sidled through the door he was seated at his desk, and there he received them poring over a pile of businesslike papers.

Once within the inner office embarrassment took the place of haste in their manner, and for several minutes they conversed with him in detached phrases on conditions about Medicine Hat and the season's movements in real estate. Corfield had a fund of come-on stories intended to fill in the awkward moments in just such interviews, and he told them to-day in his best style. He was a Real Good Fellow.

Presently the one who was spokesman of the pair inquired if there were any properties on the market for which there was reasonable prospect of a quick rise in values. Was there any known reason, hidden from

the general public, but within the knowledge of Corfield, why any particular property was due for a boom?

Corfield sensed the pointed nature of the query and recalled those mysterious boxes they had carried from the train, and the tripod. He was familiar with tripods in his business.

"Well," he admitted slyly, keeping his eyes on the leader's face, "I've come into possession lately of some wonderful news. I have every reason to believe it correct, and to a small extent I have already worked on it." He leaned suddenly forward and shot his hand across the desk. "It's a high-level bridge across the river."

If he thought to catch them unprepared he was not disappointed. They started and looked at each other with surprised and chagrined eyes. The leader raised a nervous hand.

"Don't ask us a single question, Mr. Corfield, please. As honest surveyors we could not reply, or else we'd be forced to lie. Leave it as it is. The technical employees of great corporations are entrusted with secrets they could not divulge—indeed, to speak of them would be to lose their jobs. But Tom, here, and I have been working it out and we've come to the conclusion that it's time we turned a penny or two for ourselves, instead of spending all our energies in making fortunes for a bloodless corporation. Our employers will use the result of our labours to reap enormous profit from our silence, and we can't see why we shouldn't do something for ourselves as well. It's not really crooked but—but—— You understand."

"Perfectly, perfectly."

Corfield understood these little deals within deals—none better. He could skate on the thin edge of honesty without losing a breath or turning a hair.

"You do your duty to your employers in your work; if you can make anything on the side out of it, it's nobody's business but your own."

"Yes, that's how we feel, especially now we've both got families and have to look to the future. That is all

we can say. Remember we've told you nothing about our purpose in Medicine Hat. You may draw your own conclusions. Have you a map of the height here to the south of the town?"

Corfield led them genially to a huge blue print that covered the centre of one wall. Without a word he drew his hand straight across the country from the Calgary side of the river to Dunmore Junction. The two men examined it closely—and nowhere else.

"How much is land worth there to-day?" asked the spokesman. "There through the Corfield and Garrison Subdivisions? Been your land once, some of it, eh?"

"I don't own any of it now, but I can get prices on every lot of it. The Corfield, I believe, is held rather high, especially that section there next the Garrison. Friend of mine owns it. It's much better than the Garrison—close to the river, you see, and level and easy to build on. That forty lots there is held, I believe, at sixty a lot. Not so high, considering its position. The Garrison—I'm not so sure about it. But it's owned by a man who knows nothing of values—and cares less. I imagine I could pick it up at a couple of hundred an acre. Dirt cheap, isn't it? And the Garrison, as you can see, is certain to be the heart of the town that will follow the railway. The day the first sod is turned on the high-level route those lots will bring five thousand an acre, and within six months twenty times that."

The two strangers examined the map again and retired to a corner to discuss things in a low voice, returning to the map several times to run their fingers along the now familiar route. Then the spokesman came back to the desk and sank into a chair.

"Would you be willing to go halves on the profits? We have two reasons for asking. In the first place we cannot ourselves provide much cash. In the next place we must keep our names strictly out of it, though you can concern yourself on your own behalf in anything else our information seems to warrant."

Corfield seemed to weigh the proposition carefully. In reality he was eager to close the deal with a rush for fear it might slip from his reach. He knew it would require little cash to secure options on all he could handle. At the same time apparent caution would not hurt—and there might be better terms obtainable.

"Let me know your precise plan," he urged.

"We leave that entirely to you—that is, the carrying out of the—the inquiries. We know nothing of local conditions and dare not make ourselves conspicuous studying them. Our instructions are to remain here for two days to disarm suspicion, and then to get to work. The business in connection with—with what we've been discussing we leave in your hands, and after to-day we must be seen little with you. We can, however, promise you that we will not say a word about it to anyone else in Medicine Hat. We can also assure you that, to the best of our knowledge, not another soul in Medicine Hat but yourself has the information. Of course, a big part of the profit to a railway company is to get in on the ground floor and buy up the land ahead of its construction, especially where a town is planned." He stopped to consult with his companion. "That's all we can say. Do you agree?"

Corfield tramped the office with exaggerated concern.

"In other words you want me to put up all the money, do all the buying, while all you do——"

"—Is the one thing that makes the money and the buying of any value. But we said nothing about buying; we only asked in the meantime——"

"I understand all that."

"Of course, if the scheme does not appeal to you, there are no doubt others——"

"It'll take every cent I can lay my hands on by hook and crook, mortgaging everything, borrowing, all the credit the banks will give me——"

"How much you put in is your own affair, Mr. Corfield."

There was a finality, a coldness about the tone that

frightened Corfield. With a gush his well-trying cordiality came to his rescue and he held out his hand.

"By the lord Harry, I'll do it. I've handled all that stuff before and I know every foot. I think"—he winked—"the suckers who bit before will be glad to drop the hook."

The strangers smiled—the understanding was complete. Simple as that.

"Three days from now—let's see, that'll be Monday—on Monday morning we'll be round here early, about eight o'clock, with our instruments. You have a car, I believe. It won't do to hire a rig, because we'd have to load up at the hotel, and everyone would know about it within an hour. You run us out to the Corfield Subdivision and leave us there, calling again for us about six in the evening. If anyone sees us he'll think we're only doing a little correcting for you. That's all, I believe. Now, mind, not a word to anyone, on your honour."

"I'm a Bible Class teacher—the best little Bible Class in the West, I guess. That's how high I'm held in this burg. Glad to see you out on Sunday."

On Monday morning the strangers arrived promptly at Corfield's office and with their curiously shaped cases and the tell-tale tripod, now carefully covered. The two preceding days they had spent like ordinary tourists—walking over the cutbanks, watching the swift river, interested in the natural gas lighting, natural gas heating, and natural gas power that supplied the town, meeting all the trains and examining the so-called buffalo horns offered by the Indians at the station to the passengers who stretched themselves on the platform during the change of engines. Other tourists came and went, and the two strangers ceased to excite even the real estate men.

Corfield rushed them out over the Main Street grade and dropped them close to the steep bank falling away to the river at the edge of the Corfield Subdivision. There

he left them, joking about the day's boiling task ahead of them, without a leaf of shadow and with nothing to drink except what they had brought in a thermos bottle. They were too busy even to respond to his banter, and in a few minutes the car had dropped away out of sight in a depression toward town.

Once under cover, Corfield halted the car and ran along the coulee until it fell away into the general bank that dropped to the river level. Down below there was a wide flat between the bank and the water and into this he pantingly eased himself and turned back toward the Corfield Subdivision. When he judged that he had gone far enough he began an arduous climb to the prairie level again. Just below the top he selected a rough spot in which the grass was long enough to conceal him and peeped over. The two men had an instrument on a tripod, and two more instruments lay uncovered beside the one who was taking sights. The second was making careful entries in an imposing leather notebook.

With a smile of satisfaction Corfield dropped back to the river level and returned to his car the way he had come.

Before his office he pulled up and for a long time sat leaning on the wheel staring thoughtfully at his windows. "Corfield Brought the Railway" was running in his mind as an imposing addition to his signs—if he could only introduce those effective C's that were almost his trademark. "Corfield Caught the—Caught the—Caught the—" But "Railway" persisted in beginning with an R, and it irritated him that one who was shortly to possess the right of the rich could not have a little thing like this to play with.

At night he brought the strangers back to his office. He suggested that they leave their instruments there till the morning, but the strangers insisted that they never let the tools of their profession out of their sight if they could avoid it. Besides, they would not be going out next day, having made enough figures to keep them busy working

on grades and levels for a day or two. It was a matter of indifference to Corfield, so long as the thing was kept secret; he knew he could trust the surveyors for that.

Ever since the day the two men first called, Corfield had been feverishly looking up titles and agreements of sale, completing the list of owners of the property he was proposing to purchase. The next day the list was as complete as he could hope to make it, and he was ready to start in on the real work.

First of all he must see Maughan.

CHAPTER XXIX

MAUGHAN AND CORFIELD LIMITED

WHILE he was wondering whether to run out to the Double LF or to write for Maughan to come in, Corfield came on him in the Merchants' Bank and greeted him effusively.

"Looking for you, Maughan. Heaven has sent you. Come round to my office, will you, right away? I thought you did your banking at the Bank of Commerce."

"My current account is there," replied Maughan carelessly, "but I don't trust all my eggs in the one basket."

Caligni met them in the street and tried to break in, but Corfield waved him aside impatiently.

"Can't stop, Cal, Maughan and I have some rush business to look into."

In the inner office he burst out:

"By the lord Harry, Maughan, I've been on the rush since I saw you last—too darned rushed to do half what I wanted to."

Maughan eyed him suspiciously.

"I hope you weren't too busy to undertake that little job for me."

Corfield rubbed his chin apologetically, then broke into an indulgent laugh.

"I hope you won't misunderstand, my friend, but I've been worrying about your place in this thing. As a friend who knows the game I think I ought to warn you against risking too much. That yarn about the high-level bridge is as old as the railway itself. Course, I toot it a little now and then, and there's no question that the railway has seriously considered it and some day the short line may be there, but you don't want to make yourself poor for your grandchildren. You know, I've been thinking over your case a lot, more than I ever did over anyone's, I suppose. You came in here one day and as good as told me I swindled your uncle. Well, that sort of thing sticks in the throat of a decent business man. It's been breaking up my sleep, and I've come to the conclusion that it would be better for you, better for my night's rest and my conscience, if I just took up your offer that day and bought it back."

"Look here, did you or did you not make those inquiries for me about that land?" Maughan's lean face was set angrily.

"In a way I did. I've done more than you proposed. But before I get at that I want to tell you that I've done a little buying. You know those forty lots next the Garrison? Well—I bought them."

"But I didn't tell you to buy them—only to inquire the price."

"I did inquire the price and bought them—for myself."

"Corfield," said Maughan through gritted teeth, "did anyone ever tell you that you're a damned crook?"

Corfield smiled complacently.

"Nothing crooked about that. Miss Julia Kingsley owned them—I think you know her—and she was anxious to sell."

"Miss Kingsley—owned them—out at the Double LF?" gasped Maughan.

"That's the girl. I'd sold them to her and as she wanted to get out of it I thought it only decent to let her have her money back and take back the lots. And now, since you're dissatisfied with the deal your uncle made, I'm

ready to take that back too. I'll feel ever so much better. No client leaves this office feeling that Corfield is not as correct a calculator as he advertises."

"But I'm not dissatisfied—now. I won't sell, not a foot. I went out of my way to give you a job that might have paid you——"

"Now be reasonable, Maughan! I can't rest till I have that land off your shoulders. I'll sit right down now and make you out a cheque for the sixteen thousand dollars your uncle paid down for that land, and I'll assume the third that's still to pay, of course."

Maughan seemed to be on the point of frothing in his fury. He heaved himself to his feet and commenced to pace the room, Corfield watching him anxiously. At the fifth journey between window and door Maughan seemed to get control of himself.

"Corfield," he said, returning to the desk to glare down on the real estate man, "I don't mind telling you that those forty lots are absolutely essential to my scheme. Will you let me have them at a reasonable figure?"

"You haven't enough money to buy them, I'm afraid, my friend. I've taken a notion to them—they're a sort of salve to a tender conscience. But I don't want to seem to be double-crossing a client. I'm willing to make you a reasonable offer for your hundred and sixty acres. I'll increase my offer to eighteen thousand . . . twenty. . . . Well, then, I can't go above twenty-five thousand, even to save my sleep. Lord knows where I'll get the money. I'll have to mortgage the ranch and everything else to get the banks to look at me for such an amount. Now, that's liberal, isn't it?"

Maughan was obviously fighting with himself, torn between resentment at the crooked ways of one he had trusted and a desire to hide his own disappointment and chagrin. Then a look of cunning came into his eyes—oh, there was no mistaking that either. His hands began to twist and turn and his under lip sucked between his teeth. His discomfort was almost misery.

"I don't know . . . how much you know, Corfield, but I believe you've found out—somehow. . . . And I believe you can make a lot more out of this thing than I can. It might pay me to let you in. Here's my offer. If you can't see your way to it, why, I'll hang on to what I have and be content with that. I'll take twenty-five thousand in cash in my hand to-day, and ten per cent. of the profits you make on the Garrison within the next three years."

Corfield grabbed at it before Maughan could change his mind. He could afford to laugh at the percentage—there were ways of getting around that when the time came. Within twenty minutes they were closeted with the manager of the Merchants' Bank. In another couple of hours a lawyer had drawn up the mortgages and agreements and gone over the securities for the Bank. And a few minutes before closing time Maughan transferred twenty-five thousand dollars from the Merchants' Bank to an account of his own in the Bank of Commerce.

As he lounged down to the livery stable to get his horse, Maughan fingered his deposit book.

"Claude Ambrose," he grinned, "you're a hemisphere west of the Westerner."

He looked across at the window before Inspector Barker's desk, imagined an iron-grey head and a pair of pointed mustachios behind it, and waved his bank book. Then he stopped, and right there on Main Street did a step or two that astonished more than the wondering Police official.

CHAPTER XXX

EAVESDROPPING

BUT with twenty-five thousand to his name in the bank Maughan was little nearer contentment than before. There was still the mystery of Archie Wampole's disappearance.

He had slowly constructed a theory about that, but it lacked too many essentials before it could be given to the world with any hope of credence. What puzzled him most was the position of the Mounted Police in the matter. That they knew or suspected much he was certain, as he was certain that Inspector Barker would make nothing known until it suited his purpose. That official had told him plainly that things were not as they seemed, and that he firmly believed it was borne out by the singular apathy of the Police. But whether their idea coincided with his own he had no way of finding out. In effect he was left to plod his solitary course without assistance, without even a confidant with whom he could discuss his theory. In his inexperience of the ways of the country it left him open to mistakes that might nullify all his plans.

And that five thousand dollars reward looked much larger than the twenty-five thousand already in his bank book.

The addition of Texas to the mystery was a feature that beat him entirely. He did not know whether it was a brand new mystery or a side-issue of the main one. Texas had simply gone from the scene without leaving a clue of any kind. Even the other cowboys of the outfit debated it with half-formed sentences, hinted speculations, and shaking heads that betrayed their bewilderment.

Maughan became aware, too, that Old Man Wampole had been adding things together and picking up stories that had more than a little bearing on his son's disappearance. Frequently he approached Maughan in the hesitating manner of one who hopes to be proven wrong, and made clumsily veiled inquiries about the gambling den beneath Caligni's shop.

Maughan was able to assure him that he had never seen Archie there, but he gathered that someone had been talking. It was no unnatural flight of imagination to place the blame on Claire. He knew Julia was by no means in the dark as to Archie's amusement in town, but not for a moment did he suspect her of telling the old man.

His suspicions of Claire led him to keep an eye on her. What her idea was in adding to the father's worry he could not guess; he did not believe she would go so far as to take the stories to Mrs. Wampole. For Claire was never deliberately disagreeable or unkind.

It was while he was groping to the next move, impatient as ever, a little fearful of his own precipitancy, bewildered by certain new features that seemed to defy every theory he had held, that he was ear-witness of a scene between the two Kingsley sisters that hastened his plans and almost led to the disaster he feared.

Claire's room was immediately behind the living-room, all the others sleeping upstairs. Noting a light there one night after the rest of the house had darkened, he crept toward the window. Impatience to be doing made him less fastidious in his search for clues. He could always retire before he involved himself inextricably in the pangs of a guilty conscience. But with the first sound that came from the room he forgot the delicacy of his position.

The window was up, resting on a loose wire screen, and the blind was down, sucking gently back and forward in the breeze. Claire's voice rose in evident excitement. Julia was replying with cutting directness and coldness. He realized all that before he heard their words.

"You're a hard-hearted, unfeeling girl, Julia Kingsley," Claire accused shrilly. "You don't care a bit what's happened him. You're far more interested in that——"

"Claire!" The sharpness of the tone silenced the almost hysterical sister as if a hand had been clapped over her mouth. "That'll do. You're carrying yourself all the time these days on the verge of hysteria."

"And if I am, is there any wonder?" demanded Claire. "Can you live with that suffering mother without feeling heart-sick for her?"

"There are ways of feeling sympathy without increasing the grief. You don't seem to believe in them. . . . Is it only for his mother you grieve, Claire?"

"I believe I feel worse about Archie than you do," came the bold reply. "You didn't half appreciate him."

"It's a hackneyed phrase," wearily. "I think we'll agree that I knew Archie better and longer than you . . . and that I shouldn't be expected to account to you for my manner toward him—even if all you say and think were true. Perhaps you think you appreciated him more than I did. . . . Perhaps you think you *loved* him more."

There was a moment's dead silence in the room. Then Claire's voice broke again, petulant, irritated, but full of conscious guilt:

"You can be silly, Julia, when you want to be. What has love to do with Archie and me?"

"That's what I've often wished to ask you, Claire. Perhaps you're one of those neurotic girls who imagine themselves in love with every man who happens to be in the limelight. Or perhaps——"

"Julia!" Claire was really indignant now. "How can you talk like that! Archie—in the limelight—when he may be lying cold and—and——"

"Don't be tragic. Do you think I haven't stared into every possibility all these weeks? Do you think I must come to you to learn——? But we won't discuss Archie—like that. I'm going to think he's alive till he's found. An able-bodied man doesn't vanish into the air in these days in a town like Medicine Hat without a discoverable reason. Don't inject mock pathos into an event that is already hard enough for all of us."

"You talk as though you're jealous," snapped Claire, in a temper. "I'm sure you never had reason——"

"So am I."

Claire's temper loosened her tongue and dulled her wits.

"Anyway Archie was—was with me when—when he disappeared. He was with me last."

There was no mirth in Julia's answering laugh.

"I believe you're proud even of that, Claire. . . . I always hold it a little against Archie that he left you

when you were in his care. Why did he leave you? When we know that——”

“Oh, how can you be so analytical! It’s cruel.”

“Because I’m really trying to find him. If I contented myself with comforting his mother—and weaving dreams about the last few minutes I spent with him, I’d never find what happened him. Hysteria isn’t going to do much toward bringing Archie back.”

A short silence ensued before Julia spoke again:

“I may tell you that this little talk has added another reason why I want to find him—and quickly.”

“What do you mean?”

“Claire!” Julia’s voice was suddenly calm and grave. “I wonder if you don’t imagine you’re in love with Archie. I won’t ask you what you imagine his feelings are toward you. That wouldn’t be fair to either of you . . . and it might lead to a quarrel. I don’t want you to think I’m angry with you for feeling and thinking as you do. I’m scarcely critical about it. If I can’t hold a young man against other women I would rather my sister would win him than anyone else. My own selection of him proves what I think of him . . . and I always want you to have the best, Claire, dear. . . . Only, it raises an interesting situation. If Archie were here there would be no dilemma. But in his absence, whatever face we present to the world, wouldn’t it be better that we should thoroughly understand each other? I’m older than you, Claire, and I’m not likely to forget that for many years I stood in the place of mother to you. I’ve never been quite able to throw off that feeling for you. So let’s not hide a vital thing like this from each other. You know that Archie was my promised husband. I don’t know where you stand. Up to the time of his disappearance I had no evidence that he preferred you to me . . . at least, not enough evidence to worry about.”

Suddenly Claire was crying. Hysterical sobs gushed through the open window. Maughan heard a movement in the room, and then the sobbing smothered and

Julia spoke in a tone new to him—motherly, soothing, loving:

“Never mind, Claire, dear! It’s nothing to weep about. If he—I was only trying to clear things up. I can’t stand playing at cross-purposes with my little sister. If Archie showed that he loved you——”

“But he didn’t—he didn’t. He didn’t say a word. He was true to you.”

“And were you, my sister, going to be less true, dear?”

“No, no. Oh, no, Julia, I—I—— Oh, I don’t know. I liked him and—and I suppose I flirted with him—a little. There seemed so much more in common between us than between you.”

“Perhaps—— But a woman always thinks that of the man she loves.”

“But I didn’t—I didn’t love him.”

“No dear, not until he disappeared . . . and I seemed so cold-hearted. It’s not cold-heartedness, Claire, but I can’t do anything blindly . . . even love. . . . And I knew Archie Wampole well. I’m not emotional, but I have feelings as deep as most, I suppose. . . . And one of those feelings impels me to insist, Claire, that, until we know from his own lips that I am making a mistake, I should remain the woman to whom he was engaged, you—my sister only.”

Claire was sobbing audibly. “If I had been engaged to him——”

“Are you sorry you weren’t, dear?”

The weeping became louder, then muffled down into a motherly breast. Julia’s next words were sweet with love and patience:

“I don’t suppose you could help it, dear. Archie was a man any woman might love. . . . But it doesn’t prevent my being very, very sorry . . . for your sake. Perhaps if Archie returns——”

Maughan picked himself up from where he crouched and almost ran away. He lounged into the bunkhouse where the cowboys were playing cards and a discordant

orchestra of three was slaughtering a popular air. He threw himself on his bunk, and no one noticed him take a Mauser automatic from a suitcase and hang it about his neck beneath his mackinaw. A minute later he rose, yawned, and strolled to the door, lighting a cigarette. Outside he stamped it out quickly and made for the stables, where he lifted down saddle, bridle, and quirt, and, carrying them carefully to prevent creaking, continued on to a corral. Mascot came at his call. On foot he led her back from the ranch buildings and did not mount until he was over the ridge. At a canter he struck south-east toward the Cypress Hills.

CHAPTER XXXI

AN EXCHANGE OF SHOTS

THE impulse directing Maughan's night ride to the Cypress Hills was definite enough, but the absence of explicit motive or of any promise of result came home to him so vividly in the cool night air that even the impulse wavered. Several times he reined up and half turned to look back toward the valley where the Double LF lay hidden, but at such times the memory of the dialogue he had overheard through the drawn blind of Claire's window urged him on again with grim but pointless purpose.

He knew exactly what he wanted, but how to get it he did not dare stop to consider in detail. All he knew was that somewhere in the Hills lay the thing he sought, the balm for the ache he felt, the final word in the uncertainty that assailed him, the solution of a problem that concerned—he so unexpectedly had found—more than himself and a father and a mother and a promised wife, and in so many more ways.

As he rode he struggled to bring himself down from the urge of his course to its development. But somewhere through his mind ran a song of elation so loud and overwhelming that he could not keep his thoughts from it,

fight it fearfully as he did. The part of eavesdropper was not one in which he took pride, and that the results of his eavesdropping should be so crowded with ecstatic promise almost frightened him. He had unexpectedly beheld feelings that were not for him, and at times he felt like one who had seen from hiding the nakedness of two women's souls. He brought himself down to earth momentarily time and again by remembering that to some extent each woman had been playing a part for the benefit of the other; how artificial the part, how deliberate, he dare not stop to analyse. All along he had been aware of Claire's flirtation with Archie Wampole, but beyond the fact that she herself admitted it, and that Julia had all the time known of it, he knew nothing more now than before.

Yet—he was happy. To prolong that happiness he refused to examine the reason for it.

In time he permitted himself slightly to lift the curtain from the thing he trembled to consider. Julia had analysed things so calmly, so coldly; he was impressed with that as much as was her sister—perhaps more, since he had been depending solely on his ears. What did it mean? Could it be that she was as indifferent to her sister's treason as she said? Could she view with such gentle indulgence an encroachment on her rights as Archie's promised wife? If these things were impossible, why struggle to give the impression that they were facts?

He gave the reins a jerk and broke into a swift gallop. With the thrill of friends alone in a vast universe of their own horse and rider breasted the night breeze. It rippled the ends of his neckerchief and tugged at his mackinaw and Stetson like a living thing. The night was wonderfully clear, without a moon, but vivid and darkly defined to the last detail. The stars, like the simulated lights of a distant stage city, seemed to close down on him, a tight-drawn covering of gleaming dots. For once he lost the impression of a huge waste ever on the watch; he forgot the daylight haggardness of the prairie, its haunting attention. The hazes and fogs of England were dreams of another world.

He was riding in a carefully arranged void where neither dust nor mist could enter, where the space was gently moving breeze.

Far ahead of him the skyline was lifted by the crown of the Hills—everywhere else flat and round as the rim of a plate. A long-drawn "Ah!" of admiration and awe forced through his lips.

Then once more the demoniacal yap of the coyote rang about him, yet no longer menacing. Crazy souls they were who realized and resented their impotence to do him harm, and kept cringing and crying from before him. A mile distant they held their place—they dare not come nearer. He was a man, in a world dominated by man.

Maughan removed his Stetson and sent a ringing shout to them, and instantly the world he owned bowed to him in silence.

He saw then that the dark, ragged rim of the Hills had grown until it blotted out the sky ahead of him. Halting, he looked curiously about him, shifted Mascot slightly to the west, and drew up beside Elk Lake. After a long, thoughtful rest, seated in the saddle, he skirted the edge of the water and entered the first gloom of the trees. There he dismounted, removed the saddle, and, leaving Mascot to run with trailing lines, sank on his back in a cluster of scrub and in a few minutes was fast asleep. . . .

He awoke to a flare of day reflected on his eyes. Away to the north, the early sun wrapped the prairie in the sweetness of morning, while all about him the woods were still asleep in night. An hour yet before the sunlight would penetrate to his lair. Nevertheless, he rose, consulted his watch, and went to look for Mascot. He found her close to the lake, quietly feeding. He did not whistle or call, but went out and brought her in, and she followed eagerly, nosing at him, anticipating a brisk morning run. But Maughan did not climb into the saddle when he had clinched it in place. Instead, he stood for a long time with the reins in his hand, buried in thought. He peered into the

lightening darkness of the Hills and considered Mascot with appraising eye, then, with a gentle word and a loving rub, turned her loose to browse, and struck deep into the trees on foot.

As he went he kept looking about him, making mental note of conspicuous trees, of the contour of the floor of the forest, of rock and height and valley. He was following the sky clearing that had led him onward on his first visit—the visit that had given him much more to think about than the night menace of the Cypress Hills wolves. He had no fear of them now; they were creatures of the night, bent on easier prey than armed and active man.

The full light of morning came suddenly. He stopped and peered about him and finally went to a tree and examined the bark. Yes, there were still the marks of the rope that had bound him, there the holes made in the moss by his digging heels. No wonder Sergeant Prior had found them—if he was able to follow the trail that far. Out there stretched the haunting vista in which his eyes had stared so helplessly as the light faded and darkness and the howl of the hungry wolves wrapped him in.

And behind him—somewhere there—his unseen enemy had stood and gloated over him, had fired a revolver beside his ear . . . had propped up his head so considerably when he feigned unconsciousness.

Turning about, he scanned the hilly forest. Presently he set out in a straight line slightly to the west, picking his way stumblingly forward without deviation for three or four hundred yards. There he stopped and bent over the ground. For an hour he wandered about in a constantly widening circle, his eyes on the moss and rotting leaves. At intervals he returned to a spot he had marked and started out again on a different slant. The lines on his forehead deepened as time went on; a disappointed frown appeared and increased.

Then suddenly he sank to his knees with a stifled exclamation. Cattle had certainly passed that way recently! With a smile he rose and dusted his knees and looked

about him. These were the cattle he had heard that evening as he lay bound to the tree. They were moving west, and Maughan moved west.

For a time their path was plain enough, for the rocks crowded impassably in on either side. But when the configuration of the Hills modified he quickly lost himself and the trail. With chagrin he realized that he was not competent to the task he had set himself. For a long time he fought it stubbornly, but at last was forced to look in the face the fact that every trace of the cattle had disappeared and he was alone, unrewarded, in the heart of the Hills.

He was floundering about, ever hoping, ever fearing, all direction lost, cursing his inexperience and his luck, when the flinty stroke of a horse's shod hoof broke the murmuring silence of the Hills. It was close to him, so close that he sank to the nearest cover without taking time to look or to realize the inadequacy of the small bush he had chosen. His heart was beating wildly, and the blood surged through his veins. All about the thin bush behind which he lay clearing extended for fifteen yards. For a moment he lay stiff and still, his head buried in the moss. He knew that the sound that had aroused him was an involuntary kick at an impatient fly, not the noise of a moving horse. It warned him that he was under inspection, though he would have known that from the thrill that ran down his spine as he lay. Slowly he lifted his head.

The bush he discovered to be a mere veil of leaves, transparent and insecure. In the scarcely discernible breeze it waved about in great open spaces through which he must be plainly visible even while he lay flat. Looking through one of these openings he saw, above the tops of a low growth of brush, the peak of a Stetson turned toward him, and through the thin leaves below appeared a face, the lower part covered with a handkerchief. By his position he knew the man was mounted, though he could not see the horse. And as he looked, concentrating to pierce leaves and handkerchief, the black hole of a rifle barrel poked through—straight at him.

He glanced about quickly in search of better cover, but to attempt to reach the trees behind would only expose him in his flight more dangerously than where he lay. And then, with a start, he remembered his Mauser, snugly hung over his shoulder beneath his mackinaw. Jerking it from its wooden holster, he slid it quickly forward.

Before he had time to take aim the ugly black hole that faced him through the screen of leaves jerked a little, there was a jarring explosion, and with it something nipped through the bush beside his head with a terrifying whistle and thudded into a tree somewhere behind him, while the echoes roared and crashed through the Hills. Maughan ducked involuntarily, but his head was up again instantly.

He could hear the startled horse jerking about, but the Stetson still faced him. Maughan raised his Mauser once more. He was estimating the position of the horse by the man's head, the only part he could see. He had no idea of injuring the man—far from it—narrow as had been his own escape—and somehow he felt that the bullet had not been intended to come closer to him than it did. But he wanted that man, wanted him badly. If he could bring down the horse they would be on level terms and that was all Maughan ever asked. Taking as careful aim as he could, he pulled the trigger. Perhaps he pulled a little quickly at the last moment, for he heard the horse plunge.

A cry of pain answered the shot and Maughan went momentarily dizzy with alarm. Followed a deep curse and a shout, and then the horse dashed away into the brush.

At the same instant the bushes to one side opened with a burst and another horse and rider leaped through bearing straight down on him. Maughan had time only to recognize Texas Letten before he dashed for the trees behind—Texas with a face of reckless anger, riding relentlessly on his friend of only a few days ago, cursing loudly, a big Smith and Wesson in his right hand, bent low over his

horse's shoulder to offer as small a target as possible to Maughan's gun.

The intervention of a friendly tree alone saved Maughan as he dashed for the woods and dived into shadows and broken ground where Texas could not ride.

For a long time the chase continued. Maughan was making for the prairie and his horse, but he had to choose his way and his times for moving. Texas could hear him now and then and grimly kept on his trail. Maughan slunk from tree to tree, from rock to rock, lying for minutes at a time while the cowboy sat within shot waiting for him to break cover. Twice the ugly nickelled gun banged, but Maughan escaped injury in the fleeting moment of his exposure. Luck was with the chased, and Texas' mount forced him to the open places—which Maughan carefully avoided. He could follow the movements of his pursuer because of the horse's excitement. In utter silence save for the tramping of the horse and Maughan's quick rushes the chase continued.

At last Maughan came to a friendly ravine and threw himself into its depths. Texas heard him and dashed over the ridge and down on his track. But Maughan had reckoned on that. As the horse plunged noisily downward, slipping and threshing about, he crept softly back up the slope not a dozen paces distant and, once over the ridge, made for the place where he had left Mascot.

He found her feeding beside the lake, and leaped into the saddle, walking forward until the last of the trees was passed. When he heard Texas on his tracks again he lashed Mascot into a gallop and rode out on the prairie.

A shot pursued him, but the distance was too great for the revolver, though Mascot gave a leap and Maughan, looking down under his arm, saw a stain of blood on the horse's leg.

He glanced back. Texas had not come out into the open. With a shout Maughan waved his hand and galloped on.

When he had put a sufficient distance between himself and Texas' fury he pulled up to consider the situation. The

narrowness of his own escape did not occur to him. All he thought of was that cry of pain. How badly had he injured the masked rider? With a scowl he struck Mascot viciously with the quirt.

"Claude Ambrose," he growled, "you shouldn't be allowed to carry a gun!"

CHAPTER XXXII

THE MAN IN THE DARK

MAUGHAN returned to another tragedy at the Double LF. The hired girl had left—packed up her telescope valise, her three pairs of slippers, her dyed cotton dresses, and departed for the home of her parents, German fathers in Whispering Valley.

Maughan's unexplained absence had added the last straw to a burden of panic that had been closing down on her. Without admitting her belief that the ranch was haunted, she stubbornly and silently strapped the valise down and sat on it until she had mustered up courage enough to set out on the long walk home. Old Man Wampole as stubbornly told her she could walk—and go on walking until she arrived at a place that is usually reached by more involuntary methods than walking.

Maughan's explanation of his absence was simple enough: he had yielded to the lure of the beautiful night and ridden so far that he decided to sleep out under the stars. But when morning came Mascot had made decisions of her own, the only important one being that freedom was too infrequent to consider too early a termination. Therefore, though he had left the reins trailing, she had led him a merry chase all morning beyond Elk Lake. Mascot's accomplishment of moving sideways to escape the trailing lines was too well known to cast doubt on the story.

Mrs. Wampole heard the story coldly—not suspiciously, but she blamed Maughan for two things of which he was

not deliberately guilty: the sudden departure of the hired girl and the momentary distraction of their thoughts from the one supreme tragedy the mother was nursing. Julia said nothing—even appeared to be uninterested. Only Claire welcomed him—all the more frankly because none of the other women did.

But it was Julia alone whose attitude toward his adventure mattered; and he knew her well enough now to be aware that her lack of interest was feigned, that she appeared not to listen because she knew that his explanation was not worth listening to.

With a desire to right himself in her eyes—even to tell her sufficient of his real adventure to justify his silence about details to the others—he sought all the afternoon for a chance to speak to her alone. But she avoided him.

At night, when the cowboys were gathered in the bunk-house behind the screen door, he picked up Dan's violin—that had been screeching out nightly terrors as regularly as the dishes were removed from the dinner table—and began lazily to play. Thereby he came nigh to sealing his fate for the night, since the others, dropping their games of cards to listen, would not let him stop. For almost an hour he yielded, then, laughing, put down the instrument and ran outside to escape them.

Seeing the light in the living-room window he was struck with the idea of once more trying to convey to Julia Kingsley something of the things that had happened that day. With that thought in mind he started for the ranch house.

As he came round the corner in the darkness a flicker of movement forty yards up the slope before the front door sent him face downward into the long grass, his nose close to the mouldy odour of the prairie. He had waited to see nothing more than the blotting out of a few of the brilliant stars, a blacker blackness against the clear dark sky.

He realised that where he lay he was more invisible because of the lighted window beside him. After a few

seconds of acute listening he lifted his head. The shadow was nearer now—not more than forty yards from the front door. Maughan squirmed backwards past the corner of the house, jumped to his feet, and ran around the back to the other side. There he would be able to watch from an unsuspected angle.

By the dim light that came through the screen door he made out the figure of a man lying at full length, peering through the long grass into the living-room. He thought of his gun, and regretted that it was locked in his suitcase in the bunkhouse.

For a long time they lay, neither moving. Inside the ranch house murmurs of conversation floated through the open door, mostly Wampole's voice, reading from the latest bundle of papers to reach the ranch. At intervals Claire said something, Wampole always making the replies.

The shelf clock in the living-room chimed eleven, and with the last stroke Wampole came to the screen door, let himself through, and stood staring into the darkness up the trail to the crest of the valley. It was his final nightly act now since Archie had disappeared. When he returned inside, letting the door fly shut on its leather stop, he hooked it lingeringly, picked up the lamp, and, preceded by Julia and his wife, passed into the stairway, leaving the living-room in darkness. Claire had already retired to her room at the back.

The man lying in the grass rose to his feet and disappeared around the west corner of the house. Maughan sped around the opposite way and wormed himself to a point where he could see along the west side.

Over his head shone the unshaded light from Julia Kingsley's room, the only lighted window at the back. Claire's room, immediately beneath, had only the one window, facing west, directly under a second window in her sister's room. The Wampoles slept over the living-room.

As Maughan struggled to pierce the darkness of the western side of the house, the light above his head was dimmed, and looking up, he saw Julia come to the window

and stand for several minutes staring out into the night. Then the blind came sharply down.

Maughan momentarily forgot everything else, waiting, wondering. But when after five minutes nothing more had happened, he returned to his search. At first he could see nothing, though the sky at the top of the grade was clear enough to expose any movement that intervened. He shifted his attention to the other ranch buildings but unless the stranger was lying down he was certainly not in that direction. And Maughan was convinced that he was interested only in the ranch house. A sweat of uncertainty began to break out on him. What the man wanted was not so important now as where he was.

A dark shadow rose noiselessly close to the house, from the shallow ditch left by banking the cellar walls against frost. Just beyond the lighted square of Claire's window it stood. The window was open, but the blind was down.

Suddenly the man drew back. Over his head Julia Kingsley lifted the screen from her side window and thrust her head through. Maughan could hear her drawing in the vigorous breeze of the prairie and expelling it violently. A nightly exercise—perhaps. With a start his eyes dropped to the man standing below. Was it a signal? Was it for that the strange man was there in the darkness?

After a half-dozen loud breaths Julia retired, replaced the screen, and pulled down window and blind. Only the dim fawn of the lighted window remained.

The window of the Wampoles' bedroom in front of Julia's blanked out. Two minutes later Julia's room was in darkness. But Claire's light still burned. The shadow beyond it held its place. Then the last lamp in the ranch house was blown out and Claire, coming to the window, slid up the blind. With the noise the strange man advanced before the darker square of the open window. Claire gasped audibly, choked it off with a nervous laugh, and whispered:

"Is that you, Mr. Maughan?"

Maughan ground his teeth. The half fearful, half eager, wholly coy and languishing tone of it made him sink his

blushing face in the grass. Above her another window was open, and he prayed that Julia was fast asleep.

The man hissed gently, and to Maughan's astonished ears came the low words:

"Don't speak, Miss Kingsley. It's Texas."

Claire could not quite control the sound that broke from her lips. Tex raised the window from the screen a few inches and passed his hand through. Maughan caught the white flash of a piece of paper. The blind inside was drawn gently down and a moment later the square of Claire's window was light again. After a time the light went very low. The blind was pulled slightly to one side and Claire said something Maughan could not hear. Then the light came up again and bustle sounded within the room. Texas had dropped again to the ditch, waiting.

The light went out, the blind slid softly up, the screen was lifted inside, and a large white bundle and a suitcase were handed out. And Claire Kingsley climbed softly through the window, assisted by the cowboy. Not a word was spoken. Tex picked up the two parcels and together they disappeared around the front of the house. . . .

Standing at the corner, Maughan heard the distant thud of horses' hoofs. Thoughtfully he started back toward the bunkhouse. As he passed the still open window, through which Claire had climbed into Texas' arms, his eyes lifted. The round shape of a head stood out against the sky from the window above, and Julia Kingsley laughed down on him—a laugh low and bitter.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE REWARD INCREASED

IT was from Old Man Wampole that Maughan heard next morning the news that was not news to him—the latest mystery that was as great a mystery to him as to anyone. The old man sought him out. In his

crusty old heart had sprung a strange affection for the impudent, reckless, educated Englishman who in so many ways reminded him of his son.

Maughan beheld him that morning a sadly altered old man. The fiery temperament, the vitality, the stubborn grit of him seemed to have gone at last. The shaggy grey hair was standing more awry than ever, his eyebrows hung limp instead of bristly, his cheeks were suddenly haggard, and some of the spring had gone from his step. Temporarily at least his spirit was flagging beneath the new burden that made the total so heavy. He looked years older, and into his eyes had crept a haunted look, almost like fear. Before Maughan he threw up his hands, then he led him into the living-room and told the story of Claire's empty room.

"Another!" he groaned. "My God, Maughan, another! She's kidnapped, the devils!—carried off right under my nose. Which of us will be next? There's something——"

Julia came out from her sister's room, a piece of paper in her hand. She passed it to Maughan without a word. As he took it he looked at her with surprise. She had changed almost as much as the old man. In her eyes were the tears of a sleepless night, not of the few minutes since they had discovered the empty room. Dark circles showed even on her dark skin and new wrinkles had come to her forehead. Her hair was less tidy than usual, her poise less buoyant. Yet withal there breathed from her a studied defiance, a stubborn refusal to recognize the signs of her night of suffering. Maughan read the note aloud to Wampole:

"Don't worry about me, anyone. It is necessary for me to leave and I am so sorry I have to do it like this. I'll write as soon as I can. But I am perfectly safe."

The old man shouted in his anger and fear:

"I tell you they made her write it. They've kidnapped her."

He paced excitedly across the room and back and stopped before Maughan with clenched fists.

"I'm going to clean this mess up if I have to get a detective from the East. I'd give a thousand dollars even to know she's still alive. The Mounted Police are fools. They don't care—or let on they don't when they run up against a mystery they can't unravel. They've been shirking things from the first—Archie—the rustling—Texas—and now it'll be Claire." He looked from Maughan to Julia with a light in his face. "I don't believe they want to find out. Why? That's what I'm going to know if I have to sell every head on the ranch to do it."

For a few minutes he fumed, while Maughan considered and Julia kept her face averted, absent-mindedly arranging the books on a shelf.

"I haven't an enemy in the world that I know of," the old man continued, "unless it's the friends of those rustlers I sent down two years ago."

Maughan pitied him—he seemed so helpless, yet so defiant; so beaten, yet determined to fight.

"I don't see how they could force her to write this. Is it not your sister's natural hand, Miss Kingsley?"

Julia nodded.

"It would be difficult to make her write something she did not want to, with three people sleeping all about her," Maughan contended.

"They took her away and made her write it, and then brought the note back." Wampole stormed.

"But why should they—your enemies—interest themselves in Miss Kingsley, a visitor not only to the ranch but to the country?"

"Because she was the only one they could reach. But what difference does it make whether they kidnapped her or not? Isn't the tangle just as great either way? Don't we want to know why she left, as much as why she was taken? . . . I believe when we know about Claire we'll know a lot more. . . . And it's worth another thousand dollars to know. To know now before anything more happens. Why—why it might be you next, Julia!"

The short laugh that broke from Julia's lips was the

same as Maughan had heard in the darkness over his head after Texas and Claire had ridden away. He regarded her wonderingly. Was there, after all, a Julia Kingsley he did not know?

Later in the day she sought him out.

"She took a bundle and her suitcase."

He nodded.

"And the bundle contained four clean sheets."

Maughan's mouth opened—and closed again. Julia's eyes were diving through him.

"You suspect—something?"

He lifted his Stetson and backed away.

"Sorry, Miss Kingsley. Your sister says she'll write when she can."

But she had the last word.

"You've done this, Mr. Maughan, and I can't—imagine—why." A break came into her voice, but she swallowed it down. "I heard your story of chasing Mascot all morning yesterday. I wonder how often you tell the truth."

Five days later Maughan rode into Medicine Hat. It was the end of a trying time. For five days he had listened to the alternate fury and fears of Old Man Wampole. For five days he had been dodging Julia Kingsley with a greater zeal than she had ever avoided him. For five days he had ridden and pondered and pieced together a hundred absurd clues, and found only one explanation that covered even the most evident of them. For five days he had suffered from the unspoken jealousy of a mother who resented the new distraction. For five days he had heard the cowboys guessing, and always ending their surmises with a shrug of hopeless confusion.

So that when the chance came to put it all behind him, and go to town, he had jumped at it.

Also he had planned for it, since he wished to put to the test some conclusions to which his days of thought had brought him.

CHAPTER XXXIV

MAUGHAN SHOWS HIS HAND

MAUGHAN rode down the long slope of Toronto Street in the most approved cowboy fashion—lounging across the saddle on one thigh, every muscle and joint loose, sitting Mascot not as a rider but as a part of the horse's body. Stetson and chaps were showing wear and weather, his face was more deeply tanned; his cheeks were fuller, his frame more muscular. He was a tenderfoot no longer—a real cowboy now. Six weeks of intense living had done the work of months. The neckerchief of real silk he retied with some care before entering the town; he was getting all the cowboy qualities with the appearance and experience.

Returning from stabling his horse, he paused a moment at the corner where a blind street led to the barracks, then passed on up Main Street and turned in at Corfield's door.

Inspector Barker, seated in his watch tower behind the tobacco-littered desk, saw him pause. He pressed the electric bell beneath the desk and a constable entered.

"That Englishman Maughan is in town . . . and he's got something on his mind. I want to know what it is. Keep an eye on him." He held up his hand for a moment's consideration. "Tell him I want him. . . . And make sure I see him."

For one whose careless career had held many moments of excitement without seriously unnerving him, Maughan's heart thumped uncomfortably as he took his seat in Corfield's inner office.

When the word had come to him via the clerk that he should enter the excluding flap and the door marked "Private"—instead of being led thither by the Cordial one—Maughan knew that the interview was to be even

more important and strained than the other two he had had behind the frosted glass door.

When he entered the office and saw Corfield he realized that he had minimized things.

The big fellow's eyes were blazing, his face spotted with red, and now and then a great hand went up to pry at his collar. But it was not the low starched collar that was choking Corfield, but a vision of tables turned, a revelation that what becomes a habit need not be a certainty.

He leaped to his feet at Maughan's entrance. He was struggling to find his voice, gulping back the gush of words to make them intelligible. His big fist thumped on the desk with a crash that threatened to upset the heavy cut-glass inkwell. For safety's sake Maughan absent-mindedly took the inkwell in his hand as he sank into the comfortable chair dedicated to other occasions than this. Corfield's square chin thrust belligerently across the desk.

"You crook!" he thundered. "You low-down black-guard Judas! You've double-crossed me. You've got me in for this."

He hurled a letter across the desk, his Adam's apple gulping up and down in his fury. Maughan pushed his Stetson back and tilted the chair, his face as emotionless as the desk before him. With unhurried hands he unfolded the sheet and read:

"Dear Sir.—We promised to let you know when we were free to speak more fully about the job of which you are aware. We are now able to inform you that, as far as we know, there is no thought of a high-level bridge. You will remember that we expressly forbore saying there was. What you deduced from our presence in Medicine Hat and from our interview is your own affair. We have to say that we are no longer interested in the subdivisions about which we asked you to make inquiries.—The Surveyors."

Maughan read it through twice.

"I don't see—— Did you give me the right letter, Corfield? I don't seem to be concerned in this. Why do you——"

Corfield grabbed the letter and crushed it in his hand, teeth bared.

"Don't try to play the innocent with me, Maughan, or I'll lose my temper. That's your doings—all of it. I see it as plain now——"

"I gather you see it too late."

"And now," Corfield stormed, "I'm loaded up with your whole subdivision and a big part of the Corfield. I'm mortgaged to the hilt—even to my car. And what have I got?"

"Exactly what you had before, I should say, and sold to those who were in no position to know the truth. *You* bought with your eyes open. Indeed, you bought expressly against my orders. I asked you only for prices—quite insisted on that, you remember. If you tried to get ahead of me and buy for yourself——"

Corfield's face was purple.

"You god-damn crook! And that's the first time I've sworn in ten years. You know why I bought."

"Yes . . . knowing you, I believe I do. But I know no honest reason. The trouble is that you're far too smart to do business with me, Corfield. You're so smart you've double-crossed yourself. I don't know if there's a word in the West for that. I'd call it plain rascality."

"And you sent those surveyors here to egg me on, to get me to buy, buy, buy. You sent them here to get rid of your subdivision on me——"

"You forget that you first got rid of it on a guileless man four thousand miles away at a price that was five times the prevailing price, that you insisted on buying back from me when I plainly refused at first——"

"——And they tell me that high-level bridge is coming, and they set up their instruments and start surveying for it——"

"Did they tell you that? If they did I'll furnish you with the money to prosecute for false pretences—or whatever it would be. I'll give you their names and addresses. But"—he picked up the crumpled letter from the desk—"I gather that they faithfully followed instructions and said nothing. You don't seem to have learned that there's a possibility of being so intent on your own dishonest schemes as to neglect common care in examining the schemes of others. If you'll push their prosecution I'll pay for it. Will you? . . . Ah, I thought you wouldn't."

Corfield's fists were clenching and unclenching above the desk. He had fallen into the revolving mahogany chair and was glaring at Maughan over his moving hands.

"They—they put up their instruments right in the line where the high-level bridge would go. I saw them."

Maughan chuckled.

"Bitten again. Didn't they send you back to town so you couldn't see? Oh, Corfield, you've still so much to learn about the art of deception. At the same time I admit that for a Bible Class teacher——"

"Oh, shut your blasted prating."

"As you wish. I'm prepared to drop the subject."

He selected a cigarette from the gold cigarette case and started to pass the case to Corfield, but relented.

"So you're the man who's ruined me?"

Corfield's teeth were bared again. He leaned his great bulk on the desk, his hands clutching the sides as if preparing to spring.

"You put it badly, Corfield, one-sided. I'm the man you used to ruin yourself."

He straightened and leaned forward to meet Corfield.

"I know the games you've been playing on everyone you could hypnotize into real estate gambling. I know what you did to Uncle Ambrose—and Miss Kingsley—to mention only two in whom I'm interested. I've been able to get back on you some of the ways you've always favoured."

Corfield rose with a surge of his huge frame.

"Sit down, Corfield. I'd much rather talk to a man like you on the level. You'd like me to think you're dangerous. I can't—somehow. It's not crooks of your type who are dangerous, but you're wonderful bluffers. . . . In a minute you're going to be grovelling. And I believe I'd like to see you in the dirt for a while—it suits you. Will you sit down?"

The mild eyes took on a sudden hardness that seemed to hit Corfield physically, for he sank back with working lips.

"I've something to talk about that knocks this subdivision catastrophe into a cocked hat."

He stopped and extinguished the half-smoked cigarette. He was wondering—wondering how much he had better give away, how much he had better aim for in one interview, how much he might risk without driving the great bulk of fury before him to extreme measures.

And as he wondered, the street door to the outer office opened. He did not hear it, but his eyes happened to be fixed on the frosted glass through which everything came in soft, undefined lines. Someone came up to the mahogany-stained counter and leaned on it. Maughan's wonder eased, his face relaxed into the suggestion of a smile. In the vague outline of the man in the outer office he saw the Stetson and trim shoulders of a Mounted Policeman. Corfield, his back to the door, his bloodshot eyes fixed on Maughan, heard and saw nothing but the enemy before him.

"We haven't much time, Corfield. I imagine I'm in a hurry—the Police are after me." He leaned suddenly forward. "Corfield, take me to Archie Wampole."

The big man bounded from his chair, then, with a hollow laugh, sat back.

"What's the game you're playing now, you snipe? You've had a bit of luck, and it's turned your head. You're not sitting in now at a game of poker—with the devil's luck running your way."

"No? I believe you. The game has passed the bluff stage—it's time to show our cards. . . . And I hold the cards. Also, I'm going to play them all to the last spot. In fact, from your viewpoint, Corfield, it's not even a game but a cinch. I merely have to show my cards."

"What do you mean?"

Corfield's face had lost some of its ruddy anger and was a little strained. His hand reached out and clutched a heavy ebony ruler and drew it to him. Maughan toyed with the inkwell.

"I mean that unless you get me in touch with Archie Wampole, and right away, in his hiding-place. . . . I'll tell the Mounted Police they'll find the stolen Double LF cattle at your Milk River Ranch."

Corfield made a movement of surprising swiftness for one so large. Before Maughan could rise to defend himself that ham of a hand had descended across the desk on his shoulder and jerked him forward. In Corfield's right hand swung the ebony ruler.

"Now you English pup!" The round face was purple; murder flamed in its dark depths. "We'll see how much you'll tell the Mounties when I'm through with you. You've hung in on the game a little too long—you amateurs always do. I've got you where I want you and, by God! I'm going to get back every cent you have of mine."

He hauled the helpless Englishman round the desk and pulled a Bank of Commerce cheque-book from a drawer.

"Now, make out a cheque to me for twenty-five thousand dollars. I'm only getting back my own. You're lucky you haven't some men to deal with. But I tell you this: if you don't sign and quick about it I'll brain you where you stand. Oh, I'll take a chance on what you can do when I let you out of this room, after cashing that cheque. You haven't a witness. I have—my clerk and stenographer out there. You got twenty-five thousand from me by deception, and you threw up the sponge when I found you out. That's my whole story."

His fingers were cutting into Maughan's shoulder. The

Englishman reached for the pen with his left hand—and with his right tossed the inkwell behind Corfield's back through the frosted glass window. Corfield gasped, followed the course of the missile, and saw through the hole the figure of the Mounted Policeman.

"It'll look better for you if you put down that ruler, Corfield," said Maughan, adjusting his neckerchief.

By the time Constable Aspee stood before the shattered glass there was nothing but two laughing men seated in the office on either side of a desk, looking at the broken window.

"It's all right, Aspee," said Corfield carelessly. "Only a bit of my tomfoolery—that'll cost me about two-fifty."

Aspee looked at Maughan, who nodded his head.

"The Inspector wishes to see you, Maughan," said Aspee.

"Give me three minutes with Corfield. I'll join you if you wait outside."

Aspee picked up the heavy inkwell and examined it.

"A dangerous thing to toss about, Corfield," he said shortly, as he passed it back through the hole. . . .

From where they sat they could see his straight back on the step outside the outer office door. . . .

When Maughan and Corfield joined him they seemed in the best of spirits.

"Come up with us to Caligni's," urged Maughan. "I've about five minutes' work to do there, then I'll be free to go with you to the barracks."

At their heels Aspee fell in and followed them round Fourth Avenue to Toronto Street. Before the barber-shop he spoke to Maughan:

"I'll just go in with you."

Maughan took him aside.

"I assure you I'm not trying to escape, Aspee. In fact, I brought you here because I thought I might need you. If I'm not out in ten minutes, don't stop till you find me. And a useful piece of information in the search is that Caligni has a basement under there that serves

a lot of purposes and has a secret door. In ten minutes come in for me," he repeated aloud, so that Corfield could hear.

Inside, Corfield signalled to Caligni and the three retired to an inner room.

"I'm willing to take those I.O.U's of Archie Wampole's off your hands, Caligni," said Maughan.

The rat eyes of the Italian sought Corfield's face inquisitively, suggestively. Corfield sighed and made a limp movement with his hands. The black eyes came round to Maughan.

"I don't know that I want to sell them."

"Oh yes, you do."

Caligni scowled. "What makes you think so? They're mine, ain't they?"

"I think you'd better sell, Cal," said Corfield, perspiration gathered on his chin.

"If you don't," remarked Maughan, rising, "after to-day they won't be worth the paper they're written on."

The Italian glared.

"How do you make that out? Whether Archie turns up or not, his father'll pay them."

"I don't think you'll try to collect on gambling debts, Caligni. It isn't worth the trouble."

Caligni leered unpleasantly.

"So that's the lay? Well, I can tell you that Old Man Wampole would rather pay them ten times over than have it get out that they're gambling debts."

"But *I*'ve no objection to making it known. The Mounted Police would be glad to hear about it, I imagine."

"You'd—you'd tell the Mounties!" shrilled the Italian.

Corfield tried to pacify him, his own fear so palpable that Caligni's lips twitched.

"Without the slightest compunction, you swindler. I saw the game you and Corfield and Mason put up. You were too busy to notice my antidote. Constable Aspee is waiting out there now to take me to the barracks. It would save a trip to take the two of us together—

perhaps the three of us. I wasn't fool enough to trust myself to two rogues like you. But I'm not holding you up, Caligni. I'll pay you the face value of those I.O.U's if you hand them over quickly. I've got what Corfield had—what he had left, I mean. Now I'm going to have yours."

It was no case of bluff or trickery; Maughan held the cards. Caligni handed over the notes and received a cheque. As he paused in the outer shop to purchase a package of cigarettes he tapped Caligni on the sleeve and murmured:

"One thing more: You'd better sell out. Medicine Hat's had more than its share of you. Your special kind of graft should be distributed over the country—or perhaps the United States might find you interesting for a few years. You see, Archie Wampole will be back soon now, and I don't think a town would be healthy for both of you together, and Archie's fixed here by the ranch. I'll expect you to leave within a month. It's a saleable property, and with Corfield, your friend, to push it for you, there should be no trouble——"

Caligni's little eyes darted suspiciously toward Corfield.

"No Dan Corfield for me," he whispered huskily.

Maughan lit his cigarette and strolled out to Constable Aspee of the Mounted Police.

CHAPTER XXXV

DOUBLE-CROSSED AGAIN

THAT night Corfield pulled out of town inconspicuously by the Crow's Nest train. Maughan saw him off. In fact, from the time he attached himself to Corfield's heels after a short and inconclusive interview with Inspector Barker, he never let the real estate man out of his sight.

"Remember me to the boys on the ranch," were his last words. "They treated me as well as they knew how

a couple of weeks ago. They'll remember the English dook who jolly well made an ass of himself, don't you know, eh—what! to find those Double LF brands they'd vented a little carelessly."

The train pulled out, and Maughan smiled after the retreating lights, a smile in which was mixed a little uncertainty. When he turned about he faced the rat eyes of Caligni. The Italian sidled up to him.

"I've sold out already, Mister Maughan," he smirked, rubbing his hands.

Maughan looked into the dusky face and was not pleased with what he saw.

"It's quick work," he said. "Just the same, I'd almost as soon you'd been less successful. In case you hadn't found a buyer I was going to make you an offer myself. Corfield would sell for me in time. He's a great salesman in a great town."

The nasty smile continued on the Italian's face.

"Corfield won't sell for anyone, Mister Maughan—unless it's for himself. He's bought me out."

"Oh-h! . . . So that's what you and Corfield the Crook cooked in the few minutes I left you alone? You thought another little game on the tenderfoot wouldn't do you any harm? Sorry, but once more I have to step in and block your schemes. No, Caligni, Corfield hasn't bought you out. You've misunderstood him."

Caligni smiled weakly.

"The papers are all signed, Mister Maughan."

"You make me glad, Caligni, that I left Corfield in a position where he couldn't buy a shirt, let alone a fine business like yours. You can't sell a business without cash or the equivalent, and Corfield has neither. He doesn't own a house or a lot, or a car that isn't mortgaged to the last cent."

Caligni's trembling hand held out a folded document. Maughan read on the fold held foremost "Agreement of Sale." He took it in his hand and without reading it tore it across again and again.

"Corfield hasn't bought you out, Caligni. I've got other plans for him—now. I'll discuss them with him when he comes back. But if you can't find a purchaser I'm still open to pay you a fair valuation. Of course, that dive downstairs can't be considered."

Caligni, whose dark face had passed through a maze of expressions in as many seconds, was sobbing.

"There's no money in the barber business, Mister Maughan, and the tobacco trade is gone to the hotels. I ran the card room straight, I did, so help me—except now and then in a game of my own, and I didn't play often. And now it's got to be shut up."

He sidled closer and lifted his whining face to Maughan's. The latter thrust him aside with none too gentle a hand.

"Get away? I can't stand you close, Caligni. You—smell."

The Italian sighed.

"I know I got to do what you say, Mister Maughan, and it's hard on a man who's always made his living honest all his life—mostly. I can't help gambling now and then—like yourself. Look, Mister Maughan, come on down to the rooms now and we'll play for it. I'll play square. It'll be our last fling—and you owe me a game."

Maughan hesitated. He admired the cool effrontery of the Italian, and the gamble of it appealed to him.

"Thanks for your confidence. I couldn't play square with you, Caligni. You rouse the devil in a roughneck like me. Still—I'd go, but for one thing."

"One thing, Mister Maughan?"

"The one thing—that I'm tired of being a crook. It was chaps like you and Corfield almost gave me the taste for it. I've never been so happy as getting you two rogues in my power . . . and I'm free to admit that the way I did it was part of the pleasure. I've always tried to be a Roman when in Rome, but you and Corfield are no more the Canadian West than—I'm England. Still, I'll never forget that it was you and Corfield put me

on my feet when I was down and out. That hundred and eighty dollars I won in your joint was the start of my fortune. Now—well, I could sign a cheque up to twenty-five thousand dollars . . . and in a few days for a few thousand more—when Corfield finishes a little job we have in hand. Good night. I'm inclined to be lenient and give you the month I offered first. Now don't walk behind me; I'm nervous of men of your tribe at my back."

As he passed down the wide station platform toward Main Street, Inspector Barker stepped from the shadow of the overhanging trees.

"Where does Caligni come in, Maughan?"

"Caligni is one of the newest springs in my gait. Don't you notice it? He's thrown back my shoulders a lot and promises to make a man of me yet, Inspector. Without the little Italian—— But that's a story that'll come all in good time. In the meantime you can't bring yourself to trust me, can you? Well, I'm going to trust you—and you can do me a lot more harm than I can you. You don't know how sorry I am that I had to wiggle round all the corners in our little confab this afternoon, but I'm up to the neck in the biggest thing of my life. In a week I should be out of it—high and dry, I hope. Then I'll come and tell you the leading parts of the story. And so I'm going to give you my plans for the next few days: To-morrow I pull out of town. The next day I'll be in the thick of things. The day after that I'll be in town again—with another check. You can muss things up badly by putting a man on my tracks. Are you going to do it?"

The iron-grey man peered at him in the light of the gas lamp.

"I follow you, Maughan, follow you further than you think. You've got the whole mystery unravelled—in your own mind. And you may be right, you may be right. I hope you are. We haven't concerned ourselves with it for weeks. When you find out the story you'll

know why. Fact is, it hasn't come yet within our sphere. I'll give you two days beyond the time you ask."

He swung on his heel and clumped away, spurs jingling. Maughan went on to the Provincial. . . .

He remained in town next day until after lunch. About one o'clock he set out over the Toronto Street hill and rode toward the Double LF. Ten miles north of the ranch he swerved far out to the east, circling the ranch and keeping to the coulees. He rode slowly, so that when at last he dropped from the saddle on the shores of Elk Lake neither horse nor rider were weary. His night meal he ate from a parcel he had brought from town, and then rode in among the trees of the Hills. There he tied Mascot and returned to a point where he could sweep the edge of the Hills to the west.

Consulting his watch, he found that it was seven-thirty. The nights were falling earlier now. Already the Hills were shadowed; in another half-hour the prairie would be dark. For fifteen minutes he lay, more impatient every minute, his eyes turned westward. The Hills lay black beside him. Strange oaths came to his lips, one hand was clenched in his short greying hair.

"Claude Ambrose," he growled, "you simple, confiding child. Corfield has sprung a real one on you this time. You're out of luck. You're——"

Something moved at the edge of the shadows to the west. Maughan watched it for a moment, then struck in to the Hills, leaped on Mascot's back and rode quietly westward. Dismounting, he went forward on foot. From beneath his mackinaw he unslung the Mauser. Advancing carefully, he came on a mounted cowboy standing veiled in the shadows, peering anxiously eastward toward the lake. Maughan covered him with the gun. The cowboy was wrapped in his eastward inspection.

"You're Buster, aren't you?"

At the first word the cowboy wheeled his horse and dropped close to the saddle, and his heels flew out. They did not return in the way intended.

"Better stay where you are, Buster, till I'm through with you. You were sent by your boss—but not to meet me, as he promised. Oh, no. His little idea was that you should watch me and hold me off, eh? Well, I have the drop, and I'm not going to lose it. Throw down your guns—the rifle and that gun in your pocket. It'll be safer for both of us."

Over the face of the startled cowboy had come a look of surprise, then of amusement.

"Well, I'll be goldarned if it ain't the English dude!"

"Same chap, Buster, only in a different guise, and with slightly different feelings. It's too dark to reminisce. You knew me when I was an innocent English sportsman—spotting stolen cattle. I spotted them, and when I say the word the Mounties will want you and your companions badly."

"We didn't steal the cattle."

"No? That remains to be seen, as the baby said when it spilled ink on the tablecloth. The law, as you know, makes no fine distinction between the chap who steals them and the one who knows they're stolen. Now I want you to do something for me. But, first of all, get out in the open where it's lighter. We're going back for my horse."

The cowboy obeyed sullenly. The threat of the Police had undone the amusement he felt at the identity of his captor. Maughan climbed on Mascot's back.

"I want you to lead me to Archie Wampole."

"Archie Wampole? Who's he? I don't know——"

"If you're going to be of no use to me in here, we might as well ride right over the the Police post."

"Come along with me," said the cowboy, after a moment's consideration. "But it's going to be some dark ride."

He struck directly into the trees. To Maughan their route was blind. He could only dimly see the shape of horse and rider ahead, and before long even that faded and he followed by sound.

"Leave it to your horse," the cowboy had said early. And after that he said nothing.

Twisting and turning, climbing and falling, his leg brushing now a tree, now a rock, or bush, Maughan kept behind the other horse, gun ready. He felt more and more dissatisfied with his position, uncertain of things. What was Corfield up to now? Where were they going? How long would they have to go on in that blind darkness? He rode closer to the horse in front.

"Won't we soon get somewhere, Buster?"

No answer. With a stroke of his quirt he rode level and swept his hand across the saddle. It was empty. Buster had taken advantage of the darkness and noise of their advance to slip away. With an oath Maughan clutched the other horse's rein and pulled up to consider the situation.

Then he turned directly back and rode straight toward a star in the Great Dipper, as he could pick it out through the tree tops. After a long nervous ride they reached the prairie. It was black out there now, save for the dim light of the stars. Maughan removed the saddle from the strange horse's back and giving it a smart clip with his quirt sent it galloping into the open.

"Buster's going to have a long walk ahead of him," he murmured. "And cowboys do hate walking."

When once more he reached Elk Lake he lay down and let Mascot loose—slept well, though the night was chill—and at daybreak struck on horseback along the now familiar trail toward the scene of his first adventure in the Hills.

He was advancing slowly, picking his way and trying to formulate some plan to give point to the night's expedition, when the sharp ring of a shod hoof on the rock ahead drew him up with a jerk. Came another metallic sound, then more, and the faint beat of several walking horses. Quietly he turned back and waited in a wide clearing. From the trees ahead, as he swung to face the way he had come, rode a small cavalcade—four of

them. . . . Archie Wampole, Texas, Claire Kingsley—and laughing, along beside them—Corfield.

Maughan gasped. Corfield had double-crossed him again.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE LOST FOUND

IN a blaze of anger Maughan struck spurs into Mascot's sides and dashed to meet them—the four who had, in one way or another, played such important parts in the biggest period of his life. With working face he pulled up before them. At sight of him the quartette had stopped, moving together in questioning surprise, and Texas' gun was ready in his hand. Only Corfield showed neither alarm nor surprise. He greeted Maughan with a taunting laugh.

"Twenty minutes late, my dear Cockney. Your English ways are too slow for this country. When a thing's to be done we hustle out and do it—not trust to others to do it for us."

"You wouldn't trust anyone else," returned Maughan, his rage almost smothering him.

Corfield gave a loud laugh.

"Archie's due at the home ranch in an hour or so. We can't ride fast because of his——"

Maughan reined up beside the jeering face.

"Corfield, I wish there wasn't a lady present. I'm spoiling to tell you the kind of dog you are. But you're not through with me yet, though you seem to have won this round. Before the week's out you'll think I've only begun on you."

He turned to young Wampole, who was sitting the saddle with one knee held high in a short stirrup, the right thigh of his chaps tight and large with the dressing underneath.

"I've been on your track from the first. I knew you'd

be sorry for what you'd done, as soon as you stopped to consider."

The face of the young man scowled uncertainly.

"I don't see what you'd got to do with this, Maughan. I don't recall any mutual obligation it would be well for either of us to remember. I figure you're butting in. It's a habit you have."

Maughan flushed. "Corfield knew I had you placed. and it was only because I threatened him——"

"I do know you've been collecting my I.O.U's, that you've been chasing me from the start, that you almost killed me last week, that you've been interesting yourself in me and mine beyond all patience. Now, what do you want with my I.O.U's?"

"He understands you, Maughan," sneered Corfield. "We all do at last. I've told him how you got Caligni's notes."

"Did you tell him how I got yours, you—you—— No, I thought you wouldn't. I don't think Old Man Wampole's son would fall for the things you tried in that period of our association. Well, he won't find out from me. It looks as if he's about the size to have you for a friend. And that's the worst I can say about him."

He lifted his rein hand and swung Mascot around. Corfield roared out to him:

"You've done for yourself in these parts, without thinking you're going to make a fortune holding Archie's I.O.U's over his head. A tenderfoot's not likely to get ahead of old-timers like us—like Archie. We old-timers stick together. Here you come prowling around a Western town with your skin-games, bleeding honest men of their hard-earned money, and then you get mad when they fight for themselves. Well, you've gone too far this time. Get out of the way or we'll ride over you."

It was well-acted—the indignation of an honest man determined to back his friends. Throughout his business career Corfield had thrived so well on playing a part that

he almost convinced himself. The ranging of the old-timers against the tenderfoot was a clever move Maughan fully appreciated. Archie Wampole seemed to yield to it without a struggle.

"I'll pay those notes to the last cent," he said abruptly. "Archie Wampole never signed his name to a debt he didn't intend to pay. That's all we have to say to each other, I believe."

Maughan drew the package of I.O.U's from an inner pocket with an angry jerk.

"Archie Wampole," he sneered, "I doubt if you're worth the trouble you've caused. I don't care a cuss what you think of me, but for the sake of your mother and father I'll open your eyes to the friend you have here."

He held up Buster's rifle where the name carved in the butt could be read.

"'D. F. Brown,' Ah, you recognize it now, Corfield? One of your own cowboys from the Circle D who was to lead me to Wampole. Instead, he had your instructions to hold me off while you got in on the reward Old Man Wampole has offered for the return of his son. That's how you back up the old-timers. Buster Brown is in the middle of a long walk home at this moment. I got his horse and guns. You've double-crossed me again, as you've been double-crossing this innocent young man. You'll take him in and pocket the sixty-five hundred dollars. I hope Archie Wampole likes your kind. I don't."

With a fierce twist of his wrists he tore the I.O.U's into bits, tossed them over his shoulder, and swung Mascot away.

"Better keep an eye on the pieces, Wampole. It would be Corfield's size to put them together and try to collect."

Archie called out to him, but Maughan would not wait. He had gone but a few yards when he heard hoofs pounding behind him. Looking over his shoulder he saw Texas in pursuit. He pulled down and waited. As the cowboy came level he swept off his Stetson and held out his hand.

"I reckon the fella that calc'lates yoh a ho'ned toad ain't a friend of mine, Sparrow. And Archie don't think that way this minute. He ain't anybody's fool *all* the time. He ain't had lovin' feelin's foh yoh, Maughan, foh mighty good reasons, but he's got no cause to like Corfield any bettuh. Come on back and be one of us. He wants to gas a few words with you." He reached out and took Mascot's rein. "Besides, I reckon yoh'll be interested in hearin' things."

Maughan struck his hand away.

"If that grinning Corfield and I face each other again as I feel now one of us isn't going to come out of it alive."

"Corfield'll take a mighty big grave, too," Texas grinned. "I want yoh to know Archie well. Back of his foolishness is the squarest friend in the world. I'll take care of Corfield, old hoss."

The cowboy spurred ahead and led Corfield aside by the simple process of dragging at his horse. Corfield, blustering and startled, stared furiously at the two men he did not wish to see friends. Archie Wampole's youthful face relaxed as Maughan neared him. Half-abashed, he extended his hand.

"You've taken the wind from my sails, Maughan, by tearing up those notes. That was about all I had against you—lately. My early dislike of you is an old story that don't need discussing, I guess. I'm only human—perhaps a little more human than most men. But a fellow can't well be jealous when he's got the girl he wants, can he?" Such a boyish, half-shy smile lit up his face that Maughan felt his heart warm to the reckless lad. "You don't know what I owe you. Shake hands, with Mrs. Archie Wampole."

Maughan's head whirled.

"Mrs.—Wampole!"

"Sure! We had to have a nurse for that bullet of yours, and then I knew I needed her as a wife even more. Fact is, I've been half in love with her from the beginning. We've just got back from seeing a parson in Montana.

But that can keep till later. I want to clear up this other thing now while Corfield's here."

Maughan told what he could of his search, of the real estate deals, of his discovery of the missing cattle, of his tracing of the I.O.U's. Archie's eye lighted with the adventure of it.

"I'm not going to ask you why you did all this, Maughan. I don't care a darn—and I sure don't want to embarrass you."

With a quick frown that made him wonderfully like his fiery father he rode back to where Texas was interposing the bulk of horse and body between Corfield and the other group.

"Get off, Corfield!"

The big fellow glared, opened his mouth to speak, and was promptly shut up by the jerk Texas gave his horse.

"Yoh heard what the gentleman said? I'm apt to get real peeved when he isn't obeyed pronto."

He shifted his quirt to take a stouter hold, and Corfield looked about with hunted eyes.

"I know what an infernal liar you are, Dan Corfield," Archie exclaimed. "And all my prejudices were on your side. Now I won't ride in with you."

Corfield's big leg lifted over the saddle and he plumped heavily to the ground. Archie lifted his quirt and struck the horse across the neck. With a jerk it was free, leaving Corfield fuming but helpless.

"Catch that horse, Tex. Tie up the reins and give it a good start for home. Corfield's going to join his cowboy in a long walk. And don't," he warned Corfield, "come near the Double LF looking for a lift or I'll set Tex on you. He don't seem to like you a bit."

Corfield's bloodshot eyes came round to Maughan.

"You——cockney!" he roared. It was his second oath in public in ten years.

Archie Wampole's quirt lifted suddenly and lashed out round Corfield's shrinking shoulders; the end flicked his arm cruelly.

"That's for my wife. There'll be a few more on my own account if you don't vamoose. You thought you'd have me coming and going, didn't you? You made me steal my father's cattle to pay the I.O.U's you held, and priced them at half their value when I got them to you. A great scheme while it lasted. If it hadn't been for Maughan it would have been lasting yet. And when you saw the game was up you took a short cut to the reward father was offering for us. I don't suppose I can get you by law, but I'm going to make your life in these parts one merry little hell. In the meantime you're not going to ride in with me and get that reward."

He rejoined the others. Corfield slunk away into the trees.

"You can start and call her Claire right away, Maughan," Archie laughed, as he returned to the pair watching the scene. "You're almost a part of the family already, I understand. Well, it sure makes facing Julia more pleasant. Julia and I never would have hit it off together—and I think we both knew it. Brought sparks every time we touched. Interesting at first, you know, but a bit blinding after a while. Julia felt it first. You didn't know she'd broken off the engagement the day I cleared out. It was one of the blows that helped to bring me to my senses."

Maughan hesitated. "Miss Kingsley has worn the ring ever since." Somehow, now that events had seemed to clear the way for him, he thought of Julia protectively.

Archie laughed easily.

"Oh, she'd be true to my memory. Besides, it was the only way to keep people from talking. Julia's that sort."

"Was it because she broke off the engagement that you——" Maughan stopped, aware of the tender ground he trod.

"That I ran away? Oh, no. It was Caligni did that. When I saw him leering at Claire and me across the filthy table in that filthy room, I realized what I'd got myself

mixed up with. I owed him a lot of money, gambling in his joint. I owed Corfield a lot more for the same thing. And the debt was growing every time I played—and I couldn't stop playing. There wasn't a chance of getting clear until I had the ranch, and I sure wasn't going to count on dad's going under to save myself from my own follies. I had a vision of that fawning dago hanging round my neck for the rest of my days, and I couldn't face it—any more than I could face telling dad of my debts. There didn't seem anything to do but skip out till things straightened themselves.

“But I owed the money—there was no getting away from that—and I couldn't leave the country till it was paid. I didn't stop to figure how at first. I was in a blue funk, that was all. In a foolish moment I appealed to Corfield by letter. It was he suggested that I help myself to the Double LF cattle and pay him and Caligni that way. I've worked on the ranch for eight years—done a cowboy's work for only my keep and pocket money. Never thought of asking more, because the ranch was to be mine anyway some day. I had a vague plan of settling my debts and then skipping out to the States till I got over the hold Caligni's gambling joint had on me. But every day I got deeper and deeper in the mess. If it hadn't been for you, Maughan—that bad shot of yours, and your pressure on Corfield—I don't see where I'd have landed. I played a couple of scurvy tricks on you. I was mad—mad at everything and everybody. Oh, well—— Corfield came to me yesterday, when I was sick of the whole thing and ready to give myself up to dad and face the music. He told me you had all the I.O.U's and, you bet, I didn't propose letting you milk dad for them. That's the whole story. I'm not proud of it.”

Old Man Wampole saw them coming as soon as they topped the ridge at the edge of the valley. With a whoop he started to meet them. His wife and Julia heard the cry and came to the doorway and saw the group riding

down the slope. Mrs. Wampole groped her way to the trail and stood with arms held out, too blind with tears to go further. Julia remained in the doorway unmoved. The old man eased Archie from the saddle and handed him into his mother's arms.

"If you'll leave that leg out, mother," laughed Archie, "you can hug all the rest of me. I've a warm spot for that wound." He tickled the side of her neck in the old way.

Claire, crying softly, had jumped from the saddle and thrown her arms about Julia's neck. And Julia clutched her sister close and bent to whisper something that quickly stilled Claire's weeping. Julia's hands were both in view about her sister's shoulders. Maughan noticed that the ring was again missing. He turned to Old Man Wampole with a grin.

"There," he said, as the old man hopped about the still embracing mother and son, "there's six thousand five hundred dollars' worth I've delivered. I'll take your cheque for it."

CHAPTER XXXVII

A NEW CANADIAN HOUSEHOLD

A TELEPHONE message of a few words to the Police post at Medicine Lodge brought Sergeant Prior posthaste that very afternoon. His eyes twinkled as they fell on Archie—as they passed on to the grinning old man hovering about.

"I guess you don't want those cattle, do you, Wampole?"

"No, no. What cattle? I've not lost any cattle. I've sold a dozen or so lately. That's where Archie's been." He pretended to be angry. "Humph! A lot the Police cared what I lost."

"Well, the Police aren't allowed by the rules to accept a reward for doing their duty, and Maughan here needed the money. We gave him his chance. By the way,

Maughan, the Inspector seems to have taken a great liking to you. He's asking to see you again. Next time you're in town——"

"That'll be this very afternoon, Sergeant," Julia spoke up. "I have to go in right away."

Sergeant Prior rode away. They all looked at Julia, and no one spoke. Archie and Claire seemed embarrassed.

"Don't you two be silly," said Julia. "You're married, aren't you? Don't act as if it isn't happening every day. You'll get used to being together without blushing. Mr. Maughan can drive me in, can't he, Mr. Wampole? I have to get right back and prepare for work. School opens in less than two weeks."

Archie got up, a little abashed, and went out into the kitchen. Claire followed. Old Man Wampole's eyes were set on the door they had passed through.

"Maughan," he said, "how would you like to take a third interest in the Double LF instead of that sixty-five hundred? It's worth a good deal more than the cheque. Jessie and I are going to get out of harness and go east where life's a bit less strenuous. And I'm damned if I think Archie's fit yet to run a ranch alone—in spite of his wife and the lesson he's had—at my expense, by the way, the young scamp. I don't believe Caligni's gambling den will have much attraction for him any more."

"Caligni's joint will be closed within the month," Maughan assured him.

His eyes went slowly round until they met Julia's. With a nervous start she rose and made for the stair door.

"Miss Kingsley," he called, "please don't go for a minute."

She came back very slowly, her eyes drooped.

"Yes, Mr. Maughan?"

Maughan turned to the old man.

"Thank you, Mr. Wampole, but I'll take the cheque. I've another scheme on. Archie can manage with Texas."

He regarded Julia again. She was leaning on the table, breathing rapidly, and her eyes were still lowered.

"How long before you're packed, Miss Kingsley? I'm in a hurry for that drive."

She darted through the door. He could hear her take the steps in quick leaps, and her room door slammed behind her.

"Young man," said Wampole, "I take back a lot I said about you English fellows. Some of you are arrant asses out here, but now and then——"

"That's far more than I could expect from you, Mr. Wampole."

"And don't you go giving up the West. This is the place for you. We need you. What you need——"

"I know what I need—perfectly. Whether I get it or not is another matter."

Seated on the flimsy, backless seat of a flimsy, springy buckboard, with the bronchos reeling off the tireless miles in a steady lope, Maughan and Julia found it difficult from the moment they left the valley to maintain a general conversation.

The fine brown dust of the trail rose and fell lightly on them, impalpably, not even visibly tainting the brittle air of the level reaches about them. Maughan became self-conscious, embarrassed. He shifted his feet on the slat bottom and clacked to the running bronchos, was unduly absorbed in a pair of large flies that vied with the cloud of ordinary flies in trying to keep up with the pace, examined the whip as if it were a novelty, readjusted the neat brown suit which he had donned for the first time for weeks. He whistled a few bars of a song, examined his Bond Street boots stretched out before him, and slyly sought Julia's. But they were tucked modestly beneath the seat and he saw only the muscular curve of her knees.

He lifted his eyes and found a momentary interest in the fresh green that had grown with surprising rapidity in the tract burnt over on that memorable occasion more than six weeks ago. Finally he focussed on the distant

stand-tank of Medicine Hat's water system, and there he held his head.

Clearing his throat for a great effort, he spoke:

"You're sending in your resignation this evening as soon as we reach town."

He might have been remarking on the dry spell, so casual was it; and he ended it with a couple of bars whistled through his teeth.

From the corner of his eye he could see the start she gave.

"I hadn't heard about it." Her voice was low, stifled to indifference.

He shifted his eyes but not his head, and saw the warm colour running up and down her dark skin, and her eyes were half closed. He heard her breath catch. Her feet made a movement as if to come from their hiding place, but at the last minute they disappointed him.

"We're going ranching," he announced. "I've elected you to all the posts of importance about the ranch house—boss and general manager, but principally, wife. It's to be a joint stock company, with you holding the controlling shares. If you agree, I'll be foreman."

He felt and saw her trembling now, but in a moment it passed. He turned from the uninteresting stand-tank and saw that her eyes were misty, though her face was smiling.

"Hadn't you better—ask me?" she whispered.

He laughed like a boy.

"I don't know how to, Julia. Never did it before. Once more I'm the merest tenderfoot. But"—he threw the lines about the whip socket—"an instinct tells me how to act it."

One long arm slid round her shoulders and drew her to him, and the other hand held up her chin so that he could reach her lips. And as she nestled into his shoulder, the bronchos loping along as if the biggest thing in the world were not happening behind them, she murmured into his collar:

"You're to be more than foreman, Claude. The controlling shareholder selects you as husband."

"I was hoping that."

"Under those conditions I'll go with you to the end of the world."

"My globe-trotting days are over, Julia. I've found what's taken a lifetime of wandering to find. We're about to settle down as model citizens of the Canadian West."

She eased herself away from him and resettled her hat with a blush.

"And this ranch—Claude—where is it? I'm naturally a little bit interested."

"Oh, bother! Why get down to drab details—just now?"

"Because—because we're out in the open and—and nobody knows yet but you and me. One can see such a long way in this air—dear."

He took her in his arms again and kissed her on the lips.

"That for being seen! I want the world to see."

"You might let me take off my hat first. I have to be seen in town soon. Don't you think it would be wise to—to leave some of it for—later? Not that I mind, dear—not specially. You see, I've thought of it for a long time. Is that unwomanly of me? I can't help it, and you might as well know the worst at the start."

He made a movement as if to take her to him again, but she reached down and unwound the lines and pressed them in his hand.

"If I'm boss and general manager—there! That's your job till I ask a few questions. You should remember that now you know you have my heart you've got to satisfy my head. But first of all—the ranch."

He rubbed his chin.

"That's the one thing I don't want to speak about. It's a shade uncertain . . . but I believe I have the spot."

"All right. I'll wait. Now, dear, be reasonable!" as he reached to her again. "It's making me self-conscious,

and I want to think of nothing else when. . . . Well, just one more, then you must be good."

"It's all been rather puzzling," she said after a time, her level lids half concealing the dark iris of her eyes. "I knew I liked you a lot, and I thought you liked me, but—but you seemed so anxious to find Archie. And I was wearing Archie's ring."

His lean face broke into a large smile.

"I didn't want to have you remain a widow, dear. And you know you would never have married until Archie was found. Did it look as if I was eager to walk over a grave I had a firm idea never existed, as if I wanted to keep on supplying flowers for you to scatter to a memory? I was neither so mean nor so unselfish. I had no intention of laying siege to a confirmed widow. I knew I had to find Archie to show you that you didn't love him, after all. This air out here rather puts things out of proportion."

"But supposing there had been no Claire?"

"Claire was just an incident—a lucky incident. I knew that day at the Provincial that you'd never carry Archie's name. I believe you both knew it. I saw that you had discarded the ring that day as we walked back from the baseball game, and I thought I knew why. I understand why you put it on again after Archie cleared out."

"And I was angry at you for seeing so much," she laughed.

"And you always liked me better when you were angry at me."

"Don't gauge your future conduct, young man, on that hypothesis. I've an awful temper . . .

"But you know nothing about me," she observed, "—about my family."

"In that you have no advantage over me."

She lifted her eyes slyly to his. "The Mounted Police are friends of mine."

He grinned over the backs of the bronchos. "And after hearing the story I told them you still managed to respect me?"

"To love you," she corrected. "Anyway, I didn't believe it."

"If I'd suspected that the Inspector would spread the story I'd have added a few touches. As it was—well, I didn't exactly lie to him, but I put it in such a way that he thought I did. It's the truth that's got me in wrong and pulled me through every time since I came. I told them my father was a miner. Mine-owner would be more accurate, I suppose—a mere matter of fine distinction. Uncle Ambrose was the black sheep of mother's family, and I suppose he did far more disreputable things than sell cabbages. Did the Inspector tell you that dad left nothing more than a bill at the Three Jolly Gardeners—or was it the Pig and Whistle?—and a lot of misplaced aspirates? The fact is he hasn't left anything—he's still alive. A choice of words worthy of Corfield, but strictly true. I was a bit proud of that, you know, on the spur of the moment."

"You also said," she reminded him, "and you told me the same—that you were penniless except for a week's keep. And now you talk of buying a ranch. Sixty-five hundred dollars is little to start on, I can tell you. I can't add more than a thousand in cash myself."

"You don't need to add more than your thousand graces. Corfield was kind enough to make me a present of twenty-five thousand dollars. But that's a story to keep for rainy days."

She looked at him admiringly. "You were bound to succeed, dear."

"I've had a dozen years to try it in, and until I met you there didn't seem much chance. I never could save without a wife—without you."

She nestled tight against his sleeve.

"Now, don't take advantage of me," she begged, as he shifted about. "I'm a silly girl in love, that's all. And now I know about your family, you should know about mine."

"Don't waste the time, Julia. I'm busy."

"If it weren't right out here on the open prairie——" she threatened, hugging his arm. "Families are so dull and earthly at a time like this, aren't they? But we'll go east on our honeymoon——"

"East to England. The only difference dad and I ever had was that I wouldn't settle down. How could I till I'd found you? When he sees what you've done to me——"

"Go on, dear, I like you to be silly!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

LAYING FOR CORFIELD

INSPECTOR BARKER greeted Maughan with a gruff clearing of his throat. An unmistakable twinkle beamed from his eye. He pushed across a box of cigars, inspecting them ruefully as he helped himself to one.

"My favourite brand is one at the Provincial. It stands on the second shelf in the bar, at the right hand side. I can never remember the name of it, but the cover of the box had a picture of a Spanish dancer holding a veil from her face. It's a corona. Costs twenty-five cents a time—a cent less by the box—and I can't afford it except when my friends buy it for me. Mostly I have to be content with going in to look at the Spanish girl on the lid, while I buy a ten cent gasper."

"I think I know your house address, Inspector," said Maughan. "A box will be on your table to-morrow morning."

"Hm-m! I thought your keen sense of justice would urge you to some such recognition of the forbearance of the Police. Out of sixty-five hundred dollars I have no qualms about accepting a small reminder or the nasty thing we might have done, but didn't. . . . I was at the baseball game when that dust storm came up. . . .

And we know quite a bit about Archie Wampole and his ways before he decided the light of day was hard on his eyes. But first of all, I want to tell you what an infernal liar you were in our first interview. You lied like—like a real estate agent, sitting there in that very chair, and I knew.”

“Not quite a real estate lie—the kind I’ve come across anyway since I arrived. There was warp and woof of truth in it. The trouble was that I coloured it and you saw the colours I wished you to.”

He told of his father and uncle.

The Inspector gave a start of impatience.

“I quite forgot the order this talk was to take—as I planned it before you came. Congratulations! The girl’s worth more than the sixty-five hundred. And I know Julia Kingsley better than you do, young man.”

“But—but how did you know? It only happened this afternoon.”

The Inspector smiled. “When you want to hide anything in this country, Maughan, don’t do it out on the prairie. It’s disgustingly flat country for love-making, and the air’s so clear. Aspee happened to be riding in on another trail. But I hope you’ve more sense than to marry a girl like Julia Kingsley on sixty-five hundred dollars and no prospects till your father dies.”

Maughan drew out his bank book and passed it across. Then he explained the land deal, and as he listened the Inspector chuckled so hard that tears gathered in his eyes and he insisted on Maughan having another cigar.

“But how much more have you had to do with Corfield?”

“How much do you want to know?”

The Inspector considered a moment.

“I believe I can trust you, Maughan. You found those Double LF cattle on the Circle D. We knew where they were long before you did. But we daren’t take action. Why? Because as soon as Old Man Wampole knew that Archie had sold them, he’d declare it was with his consent. . . . And we want to get Corfield. We’ve been laying

for him for years. Things about the Circle D have been crooked for a long time, but we can't get the fall on him, and until we do we don't want to expose our suspicions. I believe we've got enough now to break in on his pipe-dreams, and I'm so anxious to put him away that I'm not going to wait any longer. He's too cute a bird to leave running loose."

Maughan looked serious. He started to speak, reconsidered, then burst out with unusual excitement:

"Don't touch him, Inspector, please! You've done a lot for a stranger already, but this means so much to me. Leave him to me. At least, let me have a try first. He still owes me something, and I'm a Shylock at collecting a debt of that kind. I believe that when he pays you'll be satisfied. I'm on the way to interview him now. It's after hours, but I see a light in his office. I may fail——"

"Humph! You're not likely to tackle it unless you're satisfied you can carry it through—with the luck of a tenderfoot. I'm not sure I shouldn't arrest you too. Goodness knows what kind of a game you're putting across."

"It's suspicion that always threatened to block me," complained Maughan, "and all because I told the truth. I admit I've run a rather devious track since I came to Medicine Hat, but it was because you all drilled it into me that I must be a Westerner if I wanted to get along. The trouble was that I didn't really know what a Westerner was. I took Corfield for a type. . . . And I've out-Corfielded Corfield. It looks to me as if the only thing that's kept him from somebody's vengeance up to date is that he's too crooked to expose to the ruthless verdict of the next world. . . . And so I'm going to expose him to some of the punishment of this world. I had a mind to let him off, but he's been trifling with my good-nature since that decision was made, and I never let a debt go unpaid or uncollected. . . . To-night I go to collect. Wish me luck."

CHAPTER XXXIX

CORFIELD TO THE END

CORFIELD was busy in the outer office when Maughan pushed through the white-lettered door and leaned against the mahogany-stained counter. The big real estate man was alone, not alone because it was after hours, but because he had found it necessary to dispense at short notice with the services of clerk and typist. He was feverishly sorting papers, setting down figures, adding them up with wide eyes and pallid face. The sunny come-on look of the Cordial one had been cast aside and was replaced by worry and uncertainty.

In the two days since Maughan's last visit a pall of neglect seemed to have fallen over the whole place. The missing letters in the famous window advertisements were so noticeable now. The blue prints hung awry. Dust lay on counter and chairs and desks.

As the door opened Corfield turned his head over his shoulder in a hunted, secretive way and fumbled with the papers before him, fumbled at his lips, fumbled his words. In fourteen hours his spirits seemed to have cracked under the weight of his trials. He tried to scowl, but the massive mobile brows refused to obey his will and he only looked frightened.

"Glad you got back all right, Corfield. Feeling stiff? Hope I'm not interrupting your final house-cleaning. I saw the light, but I knew you'd have nothing on hand more important than what I have to say to you. Do you wish to hear it here or shall we retire to the back office where the Mountie outside won't be able to see?"

"I don't see why I should talk to you at all," Corfield replied in a voice that was almost a wail. "You've broken me—you've played dirty with me from the first day we met. Surely there's nothing more you want." A touch

of the old spirit reddened his face. "There's nothing more you're going to get, and if ever I get you down——"

"Don't threaten, Corfield! One might feel some pity for you if you didn't persist in trying to bully. After this morning I can't scrape up a bit of feeling for you."

Corfield led back into the inner office and flopped into the big swivel chair. The drawers were out and parcels were tied on the desk. Some of the blue prints were gone.

"Feeling!" roared Corfield. "When did you ever have any? Here am I without a cent to call my own. You laid yourself out to ruin me, and, damn you, you succeeded."

Maughan passed across his cigarette case, but Corfield almost brushed it from his hand.

"I don't like the way you've taken to cursing of late, Corfield. For a Bible Class teacher——"

"I've resigned," snapped Corfield, and a mist was visible in his eyes. "Surely you're satisfied now!"

"That alters things; you're free now to be natural."

"Don't be funny. Here I am, loaded with a lot of valueless land that'll go back to the original owners by default at next payment day. I can't get together enough even to pay my ranch hands. The banks won't let me sell a steer——"

"Don't worry about the banks. They haven't a thing to do with you now. I hold the mortgage on the Circle D ranch."

A wave of rage swept into the round face, only to be chased by the hunted look Maughan had seen when he entered the outer office. With a helpless movement of his hands he sank back in the chair.

"I hold it, Corfield, and this morning's little incident has made me utterly ruthless with you. One can't afford to be decent to you. How do you stand for the November payment?"

"I warn you I won't have a sou!" bellowed the cornered man.

"That'll be nasty for you. No one but a tenderfoot would let that payment go, under your present circumstances, and I've an inclination to join the sacred ranks of the revered old-timers."

Corfield's teeth ground together, his hands clenched on the edge of the flat-top desk.

"By God, I'll find the money and pay you off—I'll find it somehow——"

"Even if you have to steal it—or rob some other poor sucker like you've been robbing them for years. I don't—believe—you will."

"I won't be in your power. Somebody'll trust me——"

"Look over your past, Corfield, and see if you honestly think anyone will. Perhaps you'd be willing to let the Circle D go. It's the only way you can hope to pull out with the coat on your back."

Corfield picked up the heavy ebony ruler—almost unconsciously his clutching fingers closed over it. Maughan reached forward and jerked it away.

"No, you'd better keep out of temptation. You don't know what you might do if you lost control of yourself. And I don't believe the Mounted Police would have much compassion on you."

The hunted look returned to Corfield's eyes and he glanced back over his shoulder toward the outer office.

"I won't let it go," he snarled. "I'll keep it till—till—— I'll let it go to anyone before you. It's worth much more than the mortgage—lots would like to have the chance to get it at the price I'll sell for to fool you. I'll sell out."

"To me," said Maughan calmly. "Wait till you've heard the hint I'm going to give you. Have you any idea how you stand with the Mounted Police about things that have happened at that ranch?"

Corfield's fat cheeks went a sickly white; dark lines seemed to grow beneath his eyes as Maughan watched him.

"The Mounted Police! What can they have against me? I've done nothing——"

"Haven't you? Think again. I don't mind telling you that I've come straight from the barracks to you. . . . And I had a struggle to induce them not to take immediate action in your case. You may not be aware that they've had their eye on you for years, waiting their chance; and you know they seldom fail to get it. You know how you've run the Circle D. So do the Police. Would you care for them to make an inspection of the ranch to-morrow—with you in the cells to-night? No, I thought not. You don't seem to bear in mind that in work like you've been engaged in it takes more than yourself to carry it through. What would your cowboys say in court? . . . Really, you're much too smart to own a ranch where the Mounted Police are on the job."

The big hands that lay on the desk commenced to tremble. Corfield watched them, fascinated. He had got past trying not to show his panic. For the first time Maughan felt sorry for him.

"You don't like me, Corfield. Yet, when you come to work it out I've only got back my own. I've played on you in more innocent guise the tricks you've played on others. I had to use your tricks, because you held the cards. Now I hold them. . . . And I'm going to be less merciless than you've ever been. Think over your past and try to remember one occasion when you relented from a crooked deal. I'm not naturally dishonest—though I admit that if I couldn't have got you in any other way I doubt if that would have stopped me. . . .

"I'm going to make you a proposition: I'll take over the Circle D, assuming the mortgage and paying you the balance of a fair valuation in five equal annual instalments. At that I'm taking chances, since I don't know how deeply you've involved the ranch's assets in your crookedness. Otherwise—well, I'm not likely to interfere with the Mounted Police."

Corfield looked gloomily about the office, his eyes resting

a moment on each blue print in turn. They revived in his mind a thousand schemes, a thousand swindles that just shaved the law, a thousand triumphs that had lost their glamour in this moment of his ruin. Painfully he lifted himself to his feet and stumbled around the room.

Maughan went on, his voice more gentle:

"It'll relieve you of the Police—I can promise you that. You can get out of town and start somewhere else. I think you'll decide to start different this time. Your reputation has spread. Speaking from a much less extended experience than yours, the chronic crook is found out sooner or later. If I were you I'd seize the chance that offers. I'm inclined to be lenient with you."

Corfield came back to the table and eased himself into the chair like a broken old man.

"You've got the drop on me, Maughan," he whispered. "There's nothing to do but accept. If it were only myself I might fight you, but I've got a wife and family. . . . It hurts, Maughan, hurts badly." A tear gathered on his eyelids. "And do you know what hurts worst? You won't believe me, but it's—it's the Bible Class. I liked it. For about an hour a week I was straight—straight as a string. I believed what I taught—at the time. I've always believed the Bible. . . . I'll have greater faith in it than ever after this. Somehow I thought—For years I've been fighting my belief in it—that what I've been doing would— But I'm not going to whine any more. I'll go back East. I was a carpenter there. I can always make a living at it and there's little temptation to run crooked." He sighed. "I guess a get-rich-quick country's too much for me."

Maughan shifted his gaze. He could not endure the suffering of the man. He felt in his pocket and placed his cheque-book on the desk.

"You'll need a bit of cash to get away clean. I'll make you out a cheque for sixty-five hundred. If it hadn't

been for you I'd never have found Archie Wampole—and many other things I'd hate to have missed. That will about cover the profit I've made from the Garrison Sub-division, less the interest on Uncle Ambrose's payment."

He opened the book without looking at the stricken man beyond the desk. Corfield stared incredulously.

"That's—rather decent of you, Maughan." But there was a note of suspicion in the gratitude.

"If you like I'll take back the Subdivision at something like its present value—say, fifteen dollars an acre."

Still he kept his eyes averted.

Corfield's face took on a cunning look. From beneath his brows he peered at the bent head, and a slow smile twisted his lips.

"Thanks," he said, "I think I'll hang on." Suddenly his fist crashed down on the desk. It had the desired effect—Maughan looked up. "I'll have something to put me on my feet again when that high-level bridge comes through—*after all*. You know about it, don't you? You're not going to put any more over on me."

A pitying smile crossed Maughan's face. Slowly he closed the book and replaced it in his pocket.

"A leopard can't change his spots, can he, Corfield? I withdraw the offer."

He came round the desk and laid his hand gently on Corfield's shoulder.

"You're going out of town, Corfield, without owning a dollar. You're going exactly as you deserve to go—as you've made others go—and nobody can stop it. I've tried. That was your last chance. It was your last lesson from me. . . . I know nothing whatever about a high-level bridge. I never did—beyond what you told me. I was trying a little test to see if you were worth helping. You aren't. I didn't think you'd learned your lesson, but I'd have made out that cheque and gladly if you'd taken the offer. But it looks as if you've deceived others so long that you can't imagine anyone running straight. . . .

Perhaps it's helped you more than the money would have. Good-bye. We'll fix up about the ranch to-morrow."

He went to the door and returned to the man whose head had fallen over the desk.

"I'll make out that cheque to your wife. It'll be my first instalment on the ranch, since you refused to accept it as a gift."

THE END

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